CORONET

GEORGIA YORK

SAVAGE KEY

SHE WAS WHIPPED BY WINDS OF PASSION — HELPLESSLY DRAWN TO A MAN SHE REVILED . . .

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SAVAGE KEY

'JENNIFER!' Bram Ainsley whispered passionately into my ear.

The dress I wore belonged to Jennifer Savage. He had mistaken me for her. Before I could speak, his arms enclosed me. His mouth took mine.

I felt his wince of surprise and knew that he had realized it was not Jennifer he embraced. I expected immediate release . . . but his arms tightened, and his mouth became even more demanding.

Strange stirrings mingled with my fear, sapped my strength. My hands ceased their efforts to push him away.

I wanted desperately to scream and destroy him forever. But I could not.

I wanted him.

I hated him.

Savage Key

Georgia York

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder and Stoughton

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First published in the United States 1979
by Fawcett Gold Medal Books

Coronet edition 1983

British Library C.I.P.

York, Georgia
Savage key.
I. Title
813'.54[F] PS3557.0/

ISBN 0 340 32053 2

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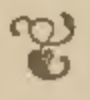
Printed and bound in Great Britain for Hodder and Stoughton Paperbacks, a division of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent (Editorial Office: 47 Bedford Square, London, WC1 3DP) by Hunt Barnard Printing Ltd, Aylesbury, Bucks

PART ONE



1

The door from my bedroom onto the balcony stood open. The soft breeze that wafted through it was filled with the scent of night-blooming jasmine and the song of a drowsy mockingbird.

This night was the most marvelous of my life. I felt myself one with it. My body was filled with a whispering yearning that had a sense of sweetness to it like the aroma of the jasmine, and a tang of wistfulness like the salt scent of the sea.

I looked at my reflection in the huge cheval mirror with its frame of carved and gilded roses. Despite the late hour and the excitement of the ball just ended, my eyes sparkled with dreams brighter even than the diamonds at my throat. My gown was of white taffeta, the bodice tucked and pointed with tiny pearls, the skirt a pyramid of flounces. I wore a mantilla of white lace on a high comb of gold filigree set with seed pearls. I seemed to billow, as fair as a tall ship in full sail, embarking on great adventure.

It was wonderful to be sixteen. For five years, ever since I had been brought to Cuba in 1865, I had been in a convent school. Now I was free like a butterfly freshly emerged from the tight little cocoon of childhood. Tonight at the ball, I had spread my wings. My heart soared.

I was a woman, and I was in love!

As my maid, Esperanza, began to undo the buttons of my bodice, she said, "Don Orlando was most handsome tonight."

"Most handsome!" I agreed, marveling that I, Laura Wickham, the daughter of a sea captain, could have won the love of an aristocrat such as Don Orlando Garcia y Dobles.

All the maidens of Spanish society in Cuba must envy me, I thought. Who could help but become enamoured of Don Orlando at sight? Who could but shiver at a caressing glance from his soulful eyes and thrill to the sound of his melodious voice? Who could but envy the way he had gazed at me as I appeared at the ball, in my billowing gown, with my family diamonds gracing my throat and the pearl-encrusted comb like a crown in my hair? I had seen the desire in his eyes!

And tonight my guardian had made the official announcement of our betrothal!

I felt I might burst with joy!

Esperanza slid the sleeves of the gown down my arms. The taffeta rustled crisply as I stepped from the dress. She peeled away the layers of my petticoats, then untied my lacy pantalets. I looked at my bared body in the mirror and hugged my arms to my breasts, thinking that in due time Don Orlando would behold me thus.

Esperanza plucked the combs and pins from my hair. It tumbled onto my shoulders in a cascade of sorrel waves, catching glints of gold from the lamplight. My hair was my best feature. My eyes were hazel, my nose was pert, and my mouth well shaped, but no matter how I protected my skin, freckles persisted across the bridge of my nose. And there was a wretchedly boyish quality about my face.

Even worse, there was a boyishness about my body.

Although I was sixteen, a woman old enough to be taken to wife, I was not well developed. My breasts were hardly more than buds. The swell of my hips was slight. My bare arms and legs seemed much too slender.

When I surveyed my shortcomings, my joy faded. To my critical gaze, my reflection seemed that of something incomplete and inadequate. Could my meager body possibly satisfy a man such as Don Orlando?

I did not know.

I had learned about the noble spirituality of love from the novels that we girls in the school had kept so carefully hidden to read in our private moments, but I knew very little of the physical aspects of love. Of sex.

I needed someone to prepare me for marriage. Someone to share the wisdom of experience with me, the way a mother would. But my mother was dead, and my duenna was so stern that I could not bring myself to ask her about such intimate matters.

I glanced at my maid. She was a few years older than I. I knew her as well as I knew anyone in the hacienda. Tentatively, I said, "Esperanza?"

"Yes, mistress?" She lifted her brows in question.

Nervous and uncertain how to express myself, I stammered as I asked, "Have you—er—ever been in love?"

Her cheeks flushed. Her lips twisted as if she suppressed a smile. Lowering her lashes, she said shyly, "I have the young heart."

My ignorance embarrassed me. I was resentful that a servant might know more than I. I blurted, "Have you ever *made* love?"

Her blush deepened. "It is not done! Not until there is a wedding and the blessing of the priest!"

Certain she was evading a direct answer, I demanded, "But you *have* done it?"

She clasped her hands to her breast and looked at me with very wide eyes. "Oh, mistress! How could you accuse me of such a thing!"

I needed to spill out my fears and doubts to someone. I wanted to beg Esperanza's guidance. But her eyes offered no sympathy. I thought they mocked me. I snapped, "Don't lie to me!"

"I would not lie to you, mistress," she said with a humility I was certain was false. I felt she must have guessed my most secret fears and was silently laughing at me.

Distressed anger surged through me. "Go away! Leave me alone!"

"But your nightgown? Your hair?"

"I can dress myself and do my own hair! I don't need your help!"

Cowed by my outburst, she scurried from the room.

I fell into morose contemplation of my shortcomings as I pulled on my nightgown, then seated myself and began to brush my hair. I had just finished putting it into braids when a small sound jarred me from my thoughts. It seemed to have come from my balcony.

My heart flinched as I remembered the *insurrectos* who were ravaging the Cuban countryside. Just the week before, they had attacked the hacienda deVarga and killed two servants before they were driven off. But *Roca Negra* was built like a fortress. Its patio was surrounded by high walls, its gates were always guarded, and its outer windows were barred with iron.

I decided I must have heard some wild creature. Perhaps the mockingbird had come to sing me to sleep. But I did not feel ready to sleep yet. My wistful yearnings were too strong to let me rest.

I wished I might walk along the beach and feel the sea breeze on my face. Of course I could do no such thing. I could not possibly leave the house without my duenna in attendance, especially not at night.

But I could stand on my balcony overlooking the garden and share the night with the moon and the mockingbird. I rose and went to the open door. The cool zephyr touched my cheek. It brought me the scent of the jasmine. And another

scent that seemed oddly like the odor of tar and sea salt common to sailing vessels.

With a puzzled frown, I stepped onto the balcony.

Something grabbed me!

A strong arm locked around my waist. A hand clamped over my mouth, stifling the scream that rose in my throat. A man whispered my name.

His voice sent a shudder through me. It aroused the image in my mind of a chained tiger, of captured violence struggling against the will that held it in check.

I realized that the scent of ships and the sea was on the hand he held over my mouth. I was terribly aware of his body against mine, of the strength of his hands and the ease with which they might subdue me. With a rush of horror, I was certain of his intention.

I swore to myself that I would fight for my honor. I would scream and claw at his face with my nails and stab at his eyes with my thumbs. But I felt very weak. The aura of maleness about him was overwhelming. My body trembled. Strange sensations tingled in my limbs.

"You mustn't scream. I don't mean you any harm," he said firmly, as if he were accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed. He spoke English, not Spanish, and his accent was American. The command in his voice was as strong as his hand over my mouth. When he drew the hand away, I did not scream.

He eased the arm he held around my waist. I jerked free of it and wheeled to face him.

The moonlight showed me a tall man with broad shoulders. He was wearing a dark jacket and a cap of the kind an officer on a merchant ship might wear. His face, a pattern of shadows in the pale light, was clean-shaven in the style growing popular among young men in America. His jaw looked hard and determined. His mouth was wide, set in a grim line. Under the cap that was cocked back on his head, his unruly hair seemed very light in color. The shadows under his brows hid his eyes, but I could feel their intensity.

I knew I should raise an alarm. I tried. My voice froze in my throat. I understood how a bird must feel, hypnotized by the stare of a snake.

He said, "Do you remember me, Laura Wickham?"

The question bewildered me. How could I know him? For five years, I had been secluded in the convent school. Before that I was merely a child. Yet something about him stirred a

feeling in me that I had known him at some time, somewhere. He seemed a ghostly figure from a long-forgotten dream come to confront me.

Catching my wrist, he drew me through the doorway into my room.

I kept thinking that I should scream. I should never be alone with him. Certainly not in the bedroom. Even if he spoke the truth and he did not mean to harm me, just his presence in my bedroom could compromise my reputation completely.

Still I did not cry out.

As he moved into the lamplight, I saw that his eyes were a brown so dark that they appeared almost black. Small images of the lamp flame reflected in them, giving him a look as if fires raged within his soul. A piece of a poem by William Blake leaped to my mind: *Tyger! Tyger! burning bright/ In the forests of the night . . .*

"You don't remember me." He sounded disappointed but not surprised.

I stared at him, trying to find some trace of him in my memory. His face, tanned and weathered, was ruggedly distinctive. The bone structure was very sharp and strong. His sun-streaked hair was the color of ivory. There was a small scar on the point of his right cheek.

I felt certain I had seen that scar before, as a bleeding wound. I could almost remember him. Almost.

I was angered by the way he confronted me, and angry at myself for not being able to identify him. Lifting my chin with haughty defiance, I demanded, "Who are you? What do you want here?"

"Do you remember *The Savage Queen?*" he asked me. "Do you remember when you ran away from home to be a seaman like your father?"

His questions startled me. I had not given thought to that adventure for years. Suddenly it was vivid in my mind again.

Now I knew those dark, fierce eyes that stabbed at me as if trying to penetrate the essence of my soul.

Astonished, I gasped the name that I had called him then, so long ago.

"Rat!"

2

It seemed a very long time since I had been a child in the United States. I remembered those years before the War Between The States as if they were another life.

My mother came from a prosperous rice plantation in South Carolina. Her family was of fine old stock. They felt she married beneath her station when she wed a merchant seaman, even though he was highly respected and was master of his own ship. He sailed *The Sea Jewel* out of the port of Savannah in Georgia. It was there that he established our home.

Our house on Habersham Street was no mansion, but it was quite nice. There was a small garden of azaleas and camelias in front, and a large yard with a good kitchen garden in the back. We kept our own horse and carriage. Our servants, a family of four, had living quarters above the carriage house.

On the plantation, mother had been accustomed to a much larger house and staff. She often said that our cozy little home and four slaves were all she could manage comfortably. But she said it so wistfully that I was certain she was trying to convince herself. Although she loved Papa dearly, she missed the elegant luxury of the plantation.

Mama never completely resigned herself to marriage and motherhood. She had been a lovely young woman, the belle of every ball and the toast of many a dashing young gallant. She never fully accepted the fact that her youth slipped away. Even though her waist thickened, her figure sagged, and her face wrinkled, she continued to carry herself like a girl, giggling at flatteries and fluttering her fan at the gentlemen.

She did not nurse her children herself. She said that she was too delicate a creature to make milk like a cow. When I was a baby, I had a wet nurse. The nurse was only hired to feed me. Our housekeeper-cook, Naomi, acted as my mammy.

I spent much of my early life playing on the kitchen floor, loving the big-bosomed woman who comforted me in my sorrows and shared my childish delights with me. It was a long time before I came to understand that my real mother was not the jovial black woman who showed me so much affection, but rather the pale lady with the golden curls, who occasionally hugged me but more often ignored me.

Eventually I grew from a chubby toddler into a freckle-faced little girl who delighted in chasing around the garden and stable and climbing trees with Naomi's son, Cato.

One day my mother noticed me at play and decided it was time for her to take me in hand. I was to leave the happy freedom of babyhood behind and start my education as a proper young lady of substance and good family.

I was told that a young lady must always be correct in appearance and behavior. There was to be no more climbing of trees. No more hide-and-seek with Cato in the stable. A proper young lady did not socialize with servants. I was to stop idling away my time in the kitchen watching Naomi knead dough while I listened to her exciting tales of the strange beasts and spirits of her home in Africa.

I had to have lessons. Tutors would instill me with all the social graces. I not only had to learn to read and write and do sums, but to recite and dance and play the harp and pianoforte and take tiny stitches in samplers.

My brother Miles, who was six years older than I, had never been forced to undergo such a torment of tutoring. Once he had learned a little reading and writing and some of the mathematics necessary to a ship's master, Papa had taken him aboard *The Sea Jewel* as cabin boy. There, he was to learn the craft of seamanship. It was planned that he would become a captain, like Papa, and master of his own ship.

The fate planned for me seemed far less attractive. I was simply to grow up, get married, and have children. At that age, such a future did not appeal to me at all.

Papa and Miles seldom stayed ashore long. *The Sea Jewel* was usually in port only long enough to unload one cargo and take on another. It was an exciting event when the ship was laid up in Savannah for rerigging and Papa and Miles moved into the house to live while awaiting completion of the work.

Miles had grown tall and tan at sea. He walked with a swagger and told stories of his adventures that held me enthralled. He had been to wonderful, mysterious, faraway places like Liverpool and Boston and Brazil.

He described sailing in northern climes where the rain came down frozen into flakes that looked like feathers falling from the sky, and chunks of ice as big as houses floated on the sea. He said that there were huge fish in the ocean that blew great spouts of water from the tops of their heads, and little fish with wings that flew like birds onto

the deck, where the sailors caught them to cook and eat, and monstrous kite-shaped creatures that looked like demons leaping from the sea into the sky, but were really just more fish.

It seemed to me that being a boy and going to sea was far more fun than being a girl and learning needlework. I was too young then to understand the real distinction between boys and girls. The only differences I knew of were in the clothing they wore, the styles of their hair, and the things they were allowed to do. I couldn't see why I shouldn't grow up to be a boy instead of a girl if I so chose.

When I asked Papa if I mightn't become a boy, he laughed and told me it was impossible. When I asked him why, he told me to speak to my mother. But when I asked Mama why I couldn't become a boy, she said sternly that proper young ladies did not talk about such things, or even think about them.

I wasn't to be put off. I decided I would just have to make the change for myself.

A lot of clothes that Miles had outgrown were stored in the attic. I found some that fit me fairly well and hid them in the nursery, in the secret place where I kept the juju Naomi had given me. Then I waited until Papa was to sail.

He had a cargo to be loaded when the ship's rigging was ready. As soon as it was aboard, he would leave on the tide. It was to be a morning tide, turning a little before dawn. I attributed that piece of luck to my juju. If it had been a daylight tide, Mama and I would have gone to the docks to see him off. But this time he kissed me goodbye before I was sent to bed. He expected to be at sea by the time I woke in the morning.

I had my own plans. Once the house was quiet and I was sure all were asleep, I hurriedly dressed myself in Miles' old clothing. I used the sewing shears to hack off my curls. With my juju in my pocket, I sneaked from the house.

I had seldom been out after dark, and never alone. It was an awesome experience for me. The world that was so familiar to me by daylight appeared distorted and alien at night. The streets were almost empty. A few watchmen were making their rounds, and near the waterfront, a few cats and dogs were prowling, but for the most part I saw only shadows that seemed filled with uncertainties.

Partly through instinct, partly through luck, I managed to avoid the watchmen. I made my way along, clutching the juju and hoping that Naomi was right about its ability to protect me against evil.

More than once I almost reconsidered and returned to my safe, warm bed. But my pride and rebellious spirit kept me going. I was determined to sail with my father and brother.

After much hunting through the dark streets, I finally found myself on The Bay, the broad avenue atop the bluff above the Savannah River. The bluff was high. The ramps were steep, walled with dank stone and filled with thick shadows. Tightening my grip on my juju, I started down one of the ramps.

When I reached the bottom, I huddled in the shadows and looked out at River Street. It and the wharfs along it were abustle with activity. Several ships were being readied to sail on the tide. A lot of lading was still to be done. Men hurried about the docks and the decks in last minute preparations. Lanterns waved and bobbed. Mingled with the shouting and cursing and steady measures of the work songs, I could hear the laughter of women. I wondered if they were going to sea, too.

I picked out Papa's ship by the bow sculpture of a young lady in a flowered bonnet and a flowing blue gown. The figurehead looked a lot like Mama. The ship was taking on a deck cargo of cotton. Papa was already on board, shouting orders as the bales were rolled up the gangplank and lashed into place.

I didn't want him to see me. I was afraid if he found me while we were still in port, he would send me home again. Once the ship was at sea, I knew he would not turn back. Not against the tide. I was certain that if I could get aboard undetected and stay hidden until *The Sea Jewel* had passed out of the Savannah River and was into Tybee Roads, he would have to take me along.

Suddenly I heard frantic shouts from the ship next to *The Sea Jewel*. I saw a glow that grew quickly into the wild flickering of flames. The fire took everyone's attention. Papa raced to the rail on that side. Crewmen and longshoremen rushed to fight the fire.

I did not know such accidents were common. I was convinced that this piece of luck was the work of my juju. Clutching it gratefully, I took the opportunity to slip onto *The Sea Jewel* unnoticed.

Once I was on deck, it was easy enough for me to hide myself among the bales of cotton. As I huddled down into a little cubby of space, I heard the shouting dwindle. Papa's voice boomed out for the men to get on with the lading. I

guessed that meant the fire was out and we would be sailing soon.

By then, I was very tired. I fell asleep quickly, happy in the belief that I would awaken at sea, starting a new life as a boy with a seafaring career ahead of me.

I woke abruptly with the nudge of a boot in my side and a gruff voice calling me names. It was daylight, and a cranky-looking old sailor with tobacco stains on his scruffy whiskers was standing over me.

He hauled me roughly out of my cubby and dragged me to the captain's cabin. The door was closed. When the sailor knocked, Papa's voice came from the other side, asking what he wanted.

He called back that he had found a gutter mouse in the cargo and he wanted to know whether to throw it overboard for the sharks or slice it up and fry it down for lard to grease the blocks. I knew he was talking about me, but he didn't frighten me. Papa would never let him do any such things to me. Still, I clutched the juju in my pocket for luck.

Papa said for him to bring the mouse on in and let him have a look at it. The sailor opened the door and shoved me in ahead of him.

My father and the first mate were standing at a table with a chart spread out on it. At the sight of me, Papa frowned as if he didn't recognize me. Then he scowled as if he did and wasn't very happy to see me. He blurted out a word I had heard Mama scold him for using at home.

In a very harsh voice, he demanded to know what I thought I was doing. Never in my life had Papa ever spoken to me with such anger. I burst into tears.

He didn't comfort me but kept insisting that I answer him. Sobbing, I explained how I wanted to be his cabin boy and sail away on adventures with him like my brother did.

By the time I was done, the first mate was grinning at me. He looked as if he would be glad to have me come along on the voyage. But Papa was still scowling. Very sternly, he told me it was impossible. I could not stay aboard. I would have to be returned home.

The mate pointed out to him that the ship was already out past Tybee Island, running with a good wind and tide, the pilot was gone, and it wouldn't be at all practical to put back. Papa agreed, just as I knew he would. He said he supposed they would have to keep me for a while, until they found a way to send me back.

I rubbed my juju, confident that they wouldn't find a way and Papa would have to let me remain aboard for the whole voyage. But my juju didn't help me this time. The very next day, we sighted a coastal schooner coming toward us. Papa hailed her and asked if she was bound to Savannah. She was. Papa lowered a boat and took me to her.

The schooner was *The Savage Queen* out of Punta Blanca in Florida. Her captain was Garrick Savage. He was a very gaunt and grizzled man with huge, knobby hands. His hard, jutting jaw was emphasized by the ruff of chin whiskers he wore. His eyes were very sharp and squinty. I shivered when he turned them on me.

Papa wasn't afraid of him at all. They had brandy together in the captain's cabin, while I cowered in a corner, awaiting my fate. Papa explained how I happened to be aboard *The Sea Jewel* dressed as a boy with my lovely curls all chopped off. He grew more and more angry as he talked, until his face was red and his voice very loud.

Captain Savage chuckled and darted glances at me, and when Papa had finished the story, the captain threw back his head and laughed a huge, bellowing laugh. When he looked at me, there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Well, now, you're a spunky young'un, ain't you?" he said.

He seemed to admire what I had done. I answered him with a shy smile. That started him laughing again.

Papa wasn't amused at all. Sharply, he said, "She's a brash little rapscallion who needs her bottom warmed. Believe me, she'll be keelhauled by her mother when she gets home from this escapade."

"Don't be too hard on her," Captain Savage said. "It's a rare and wonderful thing for a child to have such spirit. You wouldn't want to discourage that in her."

"She's got too much spirit for a girl child," Papa grumbled.

The captain shook his head. "There's no such thing in this world, sir. No such thing as too much spirit."

I begged them not to send me home. Papa told me to be quiet. Captain Savage gave Papa his promise to deliver me into the arms of my mother himself when *The Savage Queen* had docked in Savannah.

"You'd best keep a close watch on her," Papa warned. "She's like as not to try some other foolishness."

"Don't worry. I'll guard her well while she's on board my vessel," the captain replied.

Satisfied, Papa shook hands with him and took leave of us both.

Captain Savage stood by my side at the rail as I watched the small boat return Papa to *The Sea Jewel*. When Papa had disappeared on board and the vessels began to draw apart, I felt a welling sadness. My eyes started to sting with forming tears. I sniffled as I tried to hold them back.

The captain patted me gently on the shoulder. "So you want to be a seaman, do you?"

I nodded.

"Why?" he asked.

In my halting, childish way, I explained how it seemed to me that it was so much better to be a boy than a girl. He smiled, as if he agreed, and chuckled occasionally. His eyes no longer seemed so terribly sharp to me. They became warm and friendly. Soon I had lost all my fear of him and was chattering merrily away.

A new idea took shape in my mind. After a while, I ventured to suggest that perhaps I might stay on the schooner and be his cabin boy and learn to be a seaman under his command.

He pursed his mouth as if he were seriously considering the proposal. Pointing up the foremast, he asked me how I would like climbing the rigging to the top. I suspected that he meant to frighten me out of my notions of becoming a sailor, but I thought such a climb would be great fun, even better than scrambling up the live oaks in our yard at home. Saying so, I started for the shrouds. I meant to scurry up them just as I had seen sailors do. But the captain grabbed me and held me back.

Laughing again, he said that I was a bold little snippet and a child such as he would be proud to call his own. Suddenly he stopped laughing. His face became sorrowful as he added that he wished his son had half the spunk I had.

"You keep that spark of spirit burning," he told me. "Spirit's the most important thing a body can have. As long as you've got it, nothing can lick you. Not even having to go on being a girl. You hear?"

I didn't really understand, but I nodded.

He smiled in a strange, wistful way that made me feel very sad. I slipped my hand into his.

"I wish you were mine," he said softly. "Lord, I wish you were mine!"

3

Captain Savage and I took the noon meal together in his cabin. It was a very little room, very pleasant and cozy. I thought it would be a nice place to live. I asked him if he stayed there on the schooner all the time or had a home and family ashore like Papa did.

He told me he had a large house on the west coast of Florida, and a family there. He had two daughters and a son. I asked if he meant to take his son to sea with him the way Papa had taken my brother Miles.

His eyes went sad again as he answered no. Then, hurriedly, as if he wished to think of other things, he began to tell me about his vessel.

The Savage Queen was a shallow draft tern schooner. She was not as big as Papa's full-rigged ship. Her fore-and-aft sails required fewer hands to man them, and she could run closer to the wind. She sailed all along the coast from Halifax to Key West, down to Cuba, around the islands, and up through the Gulf of Mexico to places such as New Orleans. Captain Savage acted as his own agent, buying and selling his cargos to his own profit.

It seemed to me that sailing on *The Savage Queen* would be wonderful fun. Again I begged him to let me stay aboard and be his cabin boy. He said he wished he could, but it was impossible. He had promised Papa that he would take me home.

"That won't be the last you'll see of me and *The Queen*," he said. "We won't sail out of your life forever. You can be sure of that."

After we had eaten, he told me he had work to do and would leave me with the cook for a while.

The cook was an odd little man with a cocked eye and short, stringy whiskers. Once the captain was out of sight, he grumbled at me that he was too busy with his kettles to watch over me himself. He would have the galley rat do it.

I was frightened at the thought of a beady-eyed beast guarding me like a watchdog. But *galley rat* turned out to be a sailor's term for the cook's helper. This one was a boy just a few years older than my brother Miles. He stood easily a head taller than Miles, but he couldn't have weighed nearly

as much. He was as scrawny as a scarecrow. And he looked like one, dressed in tatters too big for him.

His filthy shirt hung loose from his bony shoulders. A length of rope tied around his waist held up his ragged canvas breeches. His hair was a shaggy mass of dirty tangles, like a snarl of rope tow piled on his head. There were scabs on his arms and face.

I drew back at the sight of him.

The cook said to him, "Rat, this 'ere fine lady be Missy Laury Wickham what's a special guest on *The Queen*. You're to stand watch over 'er while she be with us and see to it she don't go scamperin' up the riggin' or fall overboard or stub 'er dainty little toes. Understand?"

The boy didn't reply.

"You mind your manners with 'er now, Rat," the cook continued. "She be right proper quality folk what sleeps on silk sheets and 'as slavy gels to wait on 'er at 'ome. Understand?"

The boy still didn't say a thing. He just glared at me with dark, sullen eyes, as if I were something hateful that he hoped would go away.

The cook turned to me. "Missy, this 'ere be the rat. You mind out for 'im now. 'E be a whaler's bastard out of a New Bedford whore, and 'is fingers be as sticky as pitch. If it 'appens you've got a tuppence on you, you'd best keep it tight in your fist and your fist deep in your pocket."

I had never heard some of those words before. I wasn't certain what he meant, but it seemed as if he were warning me that the boy was a thief. I nodded solemnly. I didn't have any money, but I did have my juju. I felt it to be far more valuable than money. Anxiously, I thrust my hand into my pocket. To my relief, the juju was still there. I tightened my hand around it protectively.

The cook laughed.

The boy never said a word in reply or in defense of himself. He just glared at the cook with hate-filled eyes.

The cook gave a little shudder, almost as if he were frightened of the boy! His rasping voice was mean and full of spite as he leaned toward me to say, "The captain catched 'im snitchin' ship's stores back in port. Signed 'im on to work out the worth of what 'e already stole. I'd 'ave give 'im over to the constables meself. Gallows bait, 'e is! It'll be luck if we don't all wake up some mornin' with our throats slit!"

I was too young to understand what he was saying. His strange accent took more of my attention than his words did. The dire look he gave me struck me as funny. I giggled.

With a disgusted grunt, he turned away from me and went back to his galley. I was left alone with the boy.

Although I was appalled by the boy's vile appearance, I wasn't afraid of him. After all, I was under Captain Savage's protection aboard the schooner. And the boy was far below me socially. The cook had made that quite clear. I assumed a haughty manner such as my mother did when she addressed menials. "I'm going forward. Come along, Rat."

He spoke then. His voice was harsh and angry. "Don't call me that!"

His arrogance startled me. I turned on him. "I'll call you whatever I like! Rat! Rat! Rat!"

He stood stiffly before me, his head high. "My name is Bram Ainsley. Don't call me Rat."

But I delighted in taunting him. All the while he was watching over me, I made a point of calling him *Rat*. Each time I did it, his reaction would be the same. The proud anger would flare in his eyes, and he would say in that coldly dignified way, "My name is Bram Ainsley."

When we docked in Savannah, Captain Savage took me home in a hired carriage. Mama burst into tears at the sight of me. She grabbed me into her arms, hugging and scolding me at the same time. The captain told her not to be too hard on me. He said I had a fine, high spirit that should not be broken.

Mama turned me over to Naomi for a good scrubbing and invited the captain to stay for tea. He stayed a long while. He was still there when Naomi tucked me into my bed.

The next day I was fearful that Mama would punish me soundly, but she didn't. She never said a word to me about how bad I had been. She only asked me about the time I had spent with Captain Savage and the things he had told me about himself.

After that, whenever *The Savage Queen* was in at Savannah, the captain would call on us. He brought nice presents for me and for Mama as well. Sometimes he and Mama would go for carriage rides together. Often he stayed for supper and was still in the parlor with Mama when I was sent up to bed.

When Papa was at home, I would tell him about how Captain Savage had called on us, and show him the nice presents.

He didn't seem to share my pleasure in the captain's visits. Once I overheard him talking to Mama about them. He seemed very sad. She sounded upset. She kept saying how Papa was away from home so much and she was so lonely. She told Papa she loved him very much and she didn't mean to hurt him, but she just couldn't help herself. He said he understood and he supposed he couldn't hope to keep a free spirit confined alone in a tiny cage all the while he was at sea, and he hoped Mama was decently discreet. At the time, I had no idea what they were talking about.

Captain Savage continued to call on us regularly.

When the War Between The States began, and Georgia joined the Confederacy, it made very little difference in my life. I was still just a child. To me, the war was something happening far away that everybody said would be over in a few months at most.

Then Fort Pulaski fell. The fort stood on an island about fifteen miles downriver from the city. It guarded the mouth of the river and was said to be impregnable. But with the new rifled cannon, the Federal troops were able to capture it after just a few days of bombardment.

When news of the fort's fall reached Savannah, there was a terrible lot of excitement. The Yankees were expected to invade the city. Our soldiers came around to all the houses, borrowing male slaves to build fortifications for defense. They took Naomi's husband, and Cato as well, although he was only a boy.

Mama had Naomi pack, and we drove all the way to the plantation in South Carolina to stay with Mama's family there, safely distant from the expected battle for Savannah.

Time passed. The Yankees didn't invade the city. They seem content to hold the fort and prevent any ships from getting up the river to Savannah with supplies for the Confederacy. They blockaded all the southern ports with warships patrolling the coast.

We were worried about Papa and Miles. They were at sea, and we were afraid they wouldn't be able to come home again until the war was over. Then we learned that despite the blockade, some southern ships did manage to make port.

Mama said that if Papa got through the blockade, he would look for us in Savannah. Since the city seemed safe from invasion, she decided to return home and wait for him.

We had only been back in Savannah a few weeks when Papa and Miles arrived. Papa had run the blockade, taking

The Sea Jewel up the Ogeechee River, unloading her there, and using farm wagons to carry her cargo overland to Savannah.

The Confederates had built a fort on the Ogeechee. It wasn't very fancy, just a structure of mud and palmetto logs, but it had a good battery and managed to keep the Federal gunboats at bay. If a Confederate vessel could get past the patrols and up the river beyond the fort, it was safe.

Papa planned to keep running the blockade, carrying needed supplies into Savannah until the war was over and everything was normal again.

We never knew when to expect Papa and Miles home. Several times they were gone so long that we despaired, certain they were lost. Then they came suddenly, and their brief stays at home were like parties.

At sea, the blockade-runners lived like smugglers, always on the watch for gunboats. Sometimes they were able to avoid or outrun the Federals. Sometimes they had to fight.

Ashore, men like Papa were counted to be brave heros of the war, who kept the south supplied with the necessities that it could not provide for itself.

I was very proud of my father and brother. And still en·i·ous of Miles. I kept to my lessons and worked hard at learning to be a lady. I didn't try to run away again, although I thought about it often. I daydreamed of sailing with Papa, running the blockade, and being greeted in Savannah as a benefactor of the city.

The war went on much longer than had been anticipated. Although the battles were being fought far away, we saw their results in the streets of Savannah. There were more and more women in widow's weeds, and black wreaths hung on doors. We saw many wounded soldiers, often on crutches, sometimes with an empty sleeve or a trouser leg pinned up. We saw shipments of Yankee prisoners passing through on the way to the camps at Andersonville and Blackshear, loaded into railroad stockcars like cattle. At times we saw billows of black smoke low on the eastern horizon and knew that ships were dying at sea. Mama prayed for Papa and Miles. And for Captain Savage, too.

Like Papa, Captain Savage had turned his vessel to blockade-running. He would arrive unexpectedly at our house with gifts of coffee from South America and fine fabrics from New England and other niceties that we missed since the city

was closed to trade. Mama always greeted him as joyfully as she did Papa and always invited him to stay for supper.

Despite the increasing pressures of the war, Mama tried to maintain our lifestyle. She kept tutors coming to instruct me in the arts and sciences proper to a young lady of position. My needlework showed promise, and she had me start making things for my trousseau. She worried that the war might continue to drag on, eventually taking away young men who might be eligible when I was old enough for such things to matter. But she never doubted that the Confederacy would prevail and her world would return to what it had been before.

One cloudy, gray, autumn evening while we were at supper, we heard a cart come rattling up the street and stop in front of our house. I wanted to look out the window. Mama kept me at the table, saying that such a display of curiosity was not ladylike. She sent Naomi to the door to see what was happening.

Naomi returned wearing a worried frown. She told us that there was a sailor at the door with his cap in his hand and blood on his face. She said that he insisted on speaking to Mama and refused to go away.

My heart leaped to my throat. Mama's face blanched. Fearful that the sailor was bringing us bad news about Papa or Miles, we both rushed from the table.

In the dim light, I did not recognize the young man standing on the stoop. I only noticed that he wore the tarpaulin jacket and canvas breeches of a common seaman, and that his face was smudged and haggard.

At the sight of him, Mama collected herself. She did not consider it proper for a lady of her breeding to show her emotions before an inferior. With aloof dignity, she asked him what business he might have with her.

He said that he was from *The Savage Queen,* that there had been trouble, and Captain Savage had been injured. The captain was in the cart that waited in front of the house. He asked that mother see him.

She barely succeeded in maintaining her dignity and hiding her anxiety as she consented.

The captain had been wounded and *The Savage Queen* damaged in an encounter with a Federal gunboat. He had managed to run *The Queen* to safety beyond the guns of the Confederate fort on the Ogeechee River. The vessel had laid-to there for repairs.

Captain Savage had a fragment from an exploding shell in his side. Although he was seriously injured, unable to walk, he had refused help from the doctor at the fort. He had wanted to get to Savannah and see mother. Some of his men had commandeered a cart and brought him to her. One was waiting in the cart with him, while the other came to our door.

Mama insisted that the captain be brought inside and that he stay until his injury had healed. She had him put into Papa's bed, while Naomi made preparations to tend his wound. She had as much skill in such things as many doctors.

I was not allowed in the bedroom while Naomi removed the shell fragment and cleaned and bandaged the wound. The seamen were ordered away, too. The one who had driven the cart left, but the other refused to go. He insisted on staying by the captain's side until he was assured all was well.

I waited in the parlor as I worried about the captain. I was almost as fond of him as I was of my own father. When I heard someone coming downstairs, I hurried into the hall to ask about him.

It was the young seaman who descended the stairs. He halted on the bottom step, looking down at me.

As I met his eyes, I recognized him. He had changed since I first saw him. He was no longer a scrawny, filthy boy in rags. Now he was a tall, strong young man in the working clothes of a seaman. His hair was tousled, but neatly cropped. Except for the smear of blood from a fresh cut on his right cheek, the scabs and sores were gone from his face. But his eyes were still the same.

Astonished, I exclaimed, "Rat!"

He glared at me with the same sullen pride I had seen in him when I was under his guard on *The Savage Queen* years before.

"My name is Bram Ainsley," he snapped. Rudely, he shoved past me to hurry out to the waiting cart.

That was the last I saw of Bram Ainsley, until that night on the balcony of my bedroom in Cuba.

4

When I recognized the man who stood facing me in my bedroom, I gasped out the name I had called him as a child.

"Rat!"

Angry pride flashed in his eyes. His voice was deep and husky. It had the same cold, harsh edge to it that I had heard long ago. "My name is Bram Ainsley."

A word of apology shaped itself in my throat. But I swallowed it unspoken as he glared at me.

The arrogant insolence of his look was an insult to me. His invasion of my bedroom was deplorable. The way he had lurked on my balcony and grabbed me was inexcusable. If my guardian, Don Pedro, were to learn of it, he would put Bram Ainsley to the lash. If Don Orlando ever learned of it—no man had the right to look on another's betrothed in her nightclothes—

It suddenly occurred to me that Bram Ainsley might have been on my balcony for some time before I discovered him! He might have been peering through the crack at the hinge of the door, watching me undress. He might have seen me without my nightgown!

That possibility appalled me. Blood rushed hotly to my cheeks. Again I felt the strange unnerving thrill I had known for the first time as he held me tightly against him on the balcony. A shudder ran through me.

"How long were you there, on my balcony?" I said.

As if he had read my thought and found it amusing, he grinned. "Long enough."

"Don Orlando will put out your eyes with hot irons!"

My threat didn't perturb him. He asked, "Who is Don Orlando?"

"My betrothed!"

"You don't mean Don Orlando Garcia? Not that pretty little popinjay in the red coat and brass buttons?"

"He is a captain of the cavalry!" I said indignantly. "He is a man of position and breeding!"

The smirking grin slipped from his face. His mouth tightened. Anger flared in his eyes. I realized my words had struck him in some way that hurt him.

Knowing that I could hurt him gave me courage. I felt in

command of the situation. Haughtily, I said, "You had best be gone, *Rat*, before I call the servants and have you turned over to my guardian."

For an instant he looked as though he might strike me. For an instant I was very frightened. Then he took a deep breath and steadied himself against the emotions that raged within him.

He did not dare strike me, I thought triumphantly. He had to know the danger his presence in my room meant for him. I had only to scream and help would be at hand. He would be captured and tortured horribly before he received the release of death.

Tautly, he said, "I have a message for you."

"You've come here sneaking into my room like a thief to deliver a message!" I spoke scornfully, as if such an action were patently ridiculous. "You may go back the way you came and deliver your message to the gatekeeper."

"Would I be admitted to speak to you privately?" he asked, knowing full well that he would not. If he were admitted to speak to me at all, which was doubtful, it would certainly be under the watchful eye and sharp ear of my duenna.

I said, "The gatekeeper will give me your message."

He shook his head. "My message is for you alone. Not for the whole gossiping household."

He made it sound very mysterious. I felt certain he was making more of this message than the content could possibly warrant. Surely there was nothing anyone might want to tell me that I wouldn't be willing to have my duenna hear. I decided he was simply using the message as an excuse for his abominable behavior in hiding on my balcony and invading my bedroom.

Cocking a brow at him, I said sharply, "Well, give me this precious message and be on your way."

"Captain Savage wants to see you," he told me.

During the time the captain was a regular visitor to our home in Savannah, I had grown to love him as if he were a second father to me. I knew that he had kept calling on Mama after we moved to Cuba, but I had been away in the convent school then. I had not seen him since we left Savannah. My heart leaped with joy at the thought of meeting him again after so many years.

I refused to show any sign of my joy to Bram Ainsley. The emotions he aroused in me were stronger than my affection

for Captain Savage. Sarcastically, I said, "That hardly seems a message worthy of such stealth."

He chose to ignore my insult. "*The Savage Queen* is anchored offshore. The captain is waiting there to see you. You are to come with me now."

"What!" The suggestion astonished me. "Don Pedro would never permit it!"

"Don Pedro isn't to know of it."

"But my duenna—"

"You are to come alone."

"With *you?* What manner of woman do you think I am! My reputation! I'd be compromised!"

"Not if you weren't found out," he said quite casually.

I insisted, "Impossible! I wouldn't even consider it."

"Don't you want to see Captain Savage once more?"

"Let him come call on me in the proper way. He will be most welcome here."

For the first time since he entered my room, Bram Ainsley looked away from me. He turned toward the dresser. My comb and brush were lying where I had set them down when I went to the balcony. He picked up the ivory comb with its fine inlays and filigrees of gold. Thoughtfully, he ran his thumb along the teeth.

A surprisingly gentle sadness edged his voice. "He can't come. He isn't able to leave the vessel. He's been very sick. He may be dying."

"Oh!" I gasped. The thought of the captain lying seriously ill in his cabin, calling for me in what might be his last moments, wrenched at my heart.

Bram fingered the comb. He didn't look at me as he said softly, "Will you come with me?"

I hesitated.

I might never have another opportunity to see Captain Savage alive. I wanted very much to see him again. But I had my reputation to consider. There were things a lady of my station simply did not do.

Regretfully, I said, "I couldn't possibly. It wouldn't be proper."

"Proper!" He grunted with scorn. He set down the comb and faced me. "This can't be the same Laura Wickham who cut off her hair and ran away to sea for adventure."

I understood his meaning. For an instant, I felt ashamed of having let myself be tamed.

"I'll come tomorrow," I told him. "In the daylight, with my duenna in attendance."

"When you ran away to sea that time, Captain Savage thought you had the spirit to fight for what you wanted from life," Bram said. "He admired you for it. He thought you'd keep that spirit. Cherish it. Keep fighting for what you wanted. But you've quit, haven't you? You never did go to sea, did you?"

"That was impossible!" I protested. "I was born a female. I'll always be a female. Cutting my hair won't change that!"

"No, you can't change your birth." He sounded oddly as if he were making some personal admission. Anger crept into his voice again. A defiant anger. "But you don't have to surrender yourself to the condition you're born to."

"I don't want to change my life. I'm happy now being a woman," I replied.

"How can you let your life be dictated by others just because you are female?"

"My life is *not* dictated, Mister Ainsley!"

"You can claim it isn't. But you live locked in this hacienda like a prisoner. You can't leave it without your duenna to guard you. Some day you'll marry and go from here to be locked in another hacienda like this for the rest of your life. You don't even dare to go visit a sick old man without permission and a guard at your side. A sick old man who holds as much affection for you as if you were his own child, and who wants to see you once more before he dies. But you don't dare go to him!"

The precision of Bram's thrust both embarrassed and angered me. I said stiffly, "I told you that I will come tomorrow in a proper manner, with a companion."

He gave a sad shake of his head. There was contempt in his voice. "No. If you won't come now, alone, the way Captain Savage wishes, then you are not the woman he hoped you had become. He won't want to see you."

The years of discipline might have banked the spark of independence in me, but they had not quenched it completely. I could not have this vile, arrogant man mock me as a coward to Captain Savage.

With my head high, I told Bram Ainsley, "I'll go with you."

He gave a slight nod, as if he had never doubted that I would. Glancing at my flimsy nightgown, he said, "You'll need a wrap."

Wrap or no wrap, I wasn't going to go with Bram Ainsley while I wore my nightclothes. I intended to change first. I told him, "Go, wait for me on the balcony while I dress."

As he turned to leave, I saw him smile as if he found me amusing. It occurred to me that the decision to go with him to see Captain Savage might not have been my own after all. Perhaps Bram Ainsley had maneuvered me into a rash action. As much as I wanted to go to the captain, I wanted the decision to be mine.

I almost cried with frustration as my mind sought some way to prove to Bram Ainsley that I commanded my own life. Stepping to the armoire, I told myself that I would wear something bold. A dress that would show him I was no mere child to be tricked and mocked. My hand hovered over my ball gown. In it, I had dazzled Don Orlando. I would show myself to Bram Ainsley in my glory, a woman worthy of respect from such inferiors as a common seaman.

Then I remembered how he might have been lingering on my balcony before I discovered him there. He might already have seen me in the ball gown. And without it.

I burned with embarrassment at that thought.

Sternly, I reminded myself that I was not dressing for Bram Ainsley, but to visit a sick old man. I took down a rather plain walking costume. The dress was of dark brown grosgrain with a pleated bodice and a long row of satin-covered buttons down the back. The matching paletot was trimmed with delicate ruches.

Before I started to shed my nightgown, I glanced at the balcony. Bram stood with his back to me, his head up, as he studied the stars. He didn't even try to steal a look at me while I changed into my underthings. I felt both relieved and humiliated. Was he simply allowing me the privacy that decency demanded, or had he already seen my bared body and thought it so uninteresting that he had no desire to see it again?

Damn him! Why should I be concerned with what he thought of my body?

I pulled on the dress and reached back to button the bodice at the waist. Getting the first few slippery little satin buttons into the tiny fabric loops was awkward. The buttons between my shoulder blades were impossible. My fingers could hardly reach them. I couldn't coordinate. To my fingertips, everything felt upside down and backwards.

It had been years since I last dressed myself without the as-

sistance of a servant. I hadn't realized that I might have difficulty doing it. I struggled and struggled.

From the balcony, Bram called softly, "Aren't you ready yet?"

"No!"

I kept fighting the buttons. My hands began to tremble. I felt foolish. The whole business was ridiculous. Common women and household servants could get into their clothes without help. Surely I should be able to do as much.

Bram called again, and again I snapped at him. "No!"

His voice was heavy with impatience the third time he asked. I was almost in tears.

Suddenly I felt the touch of rough, calloused fingers on mine. With a gasp of surprise, I flinched and started to spin around.

"Hold still," Bram said, his voice a husky whisper close to my ear.

I didn't understand why I obeyed him then any more than I knew why I hadn't screamed for help when he first invaded my bedroom. But I stood submissively while his hands did the work that my own had not been able to complete.

I felt each small brush of his fingers against my back as if it were magnified a thousand times. Each touch sent a shiver through me.

He closed the last button at the neck. His fingers touched my nape. Gently they stroked my skin, tracing along the curve of neck into shoulder. My entire being quivered. I seemed to be swelling with some strange new emotion I had never known before.

Instinctively, I realized what was happening to me. My conscience and the training of years screamed silent warnings at me. I was poised on the verge of something wonderful and terrible.

My fear found voice. I gasped, "No!"

Jerking away from his hand, I wheeled to face him. Automatically, my arms crossed defensively over my throbbing breasts.

But Bram's attention was no longer on me. Cocking an ear toward the door that led into the hallway, he gestured for me to be quiet.

I heard a faint sound of stirring within the house. Slippered feet were padding down the hallway toward my room.

Bram grimaced, wordlessly scolding me for that loud gasp. Someone had heard it.

Through my closed door, my duenna called my name softly. I started to reply. Bram gestured for me to remain silent. I lifted my brows at him in question.

My duenna called again.

He nodded as if he meant for me to reply this time.

My voice catching in my throat, I said, "Yes?"

"Did you cry out? Are you all right, child?" she asked.

Bram understood the Spanish she spoke. He shook his head and shaped a word with his mouth. I spoke the word. "No."

"I thought I heard a cry," she said querulously, as if she resented being awakened from a sound sleep.

"Perhaps you dreamed it," I suggested.

Not to be put off, she said, "Perhaps you cried out in your sleep."

Bram was nodding at me, telling me to agree.

"Yes, perhaps I did," I answered.

"You're certain nothing is wrong?"

"How could anything be wrong?" I snapped, irritated by her persistence. Why couldn't she go away and let me be!

She said, "As long as I'm up, would you like for me to come in and visit with you for a while?"

"No!" I looked desperately at Bram. If he were found in my room after I had claimed nothing was wrong, we would both be punished. I would be considered as guilty as he.

He put his hands together, leaning his face against them, mimicking sleep. I nodded and called to my duenna, "Please, not now. I'm very tired. We can chat in the morning, yes?"

"Yes," she agreed. "Sleep well, child."

Too taut to breathe, I listened to the soft pad of her slippers, then the opening and closing of her door. I kept my breath held in my lungs a few moments longer. At last I released it in relief.

"Are you ready *now?*" Bram growled, as if the near-disaster had been my doing.

"Yes. Oh, wait! My shoes!"

He sighed with disgust at yet another delay and told me, "Wear something you can climb in."

His attitude angered me, but I was as eager as he to be on the way. I snatched up a pair of comfortable old walking boots. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I thrust a foot into one and started running the laces through the eyelets.

Bram looked at the long rows of tiny eyelets on each calf-high boot. "Oh, God!" he said through his teeth. "Can you walk without them?"

"I suppose so."

"Then carry them! We can't spend the whole night here while you lace them. You can put them on once we're outside, in the clear."

I had to admit to myself that he was right. It was urgent we be gone. My heart was still pounding from the fright my duenna had given me.

I jerked off the boot. Carrying the pair of them, I started for the balcony. As I passed the mirror, I glanced at myself in it. My hair was still hanging in the two long braids I had just finished when the sound from the balcony distracted me. I halted, moaning, "I can't go like this!"

Bram was in front of me. He turned to glare at me. "What's wrong now?"

"My hair!"

"Damn your hair!"

Silently, I agreed with him. There was no time to worry about a coif. I had my boots in one hand. With the other, I grabbed up pins and small combs from the dresser. I could put up my braids by feel once we were safely out of the hacienda. I didn't even think of a bonnet as I hurried to join Bram.

The balcony ran around the entire upper story of the hacienda, overlooking the patio. The ornamental wrought-iron railing, in a pattern of leaves and flowers on a trellis, was waist high. There were uprights of the same design rising to the roof above. The eaves thrust out about two feet beyond the balcony, giving it good protection against sun and rain.

"I'll go first and help you up," Bram said. He took hold of an upright and stepped nimbly to the railing. He stood poised on it, supporting himself easily with one hand on the upright.

I stared at him in astonishment. "What? You mean to climb over the roof?"

"Of course," he said, as if my question was ridiculous.

I was appalled at the idea. "But I thought—didn't you bribe the gatekeeper?"

"Can he be bribed?" Bram asked.

I had to admit, "I don't know."

He gave the idea only a moment's thought. "Even a bribed servant gossips. It's best we go back the way I came."

"But I can't climb up there!" I protested, my voice a thin little squeak.

"And *you* wanted to be a seaman!" he grunted, sounding

thoroughly disgusted with me. "Is there anything you can do?"

My eyes burned with indignation. Never in my life had I experienced such scorn and contempt as Bram Ainsley had heaped on me this night. I wanted to scream at him how much I hated him. I wanted to shove him off that railing and see him crash into the tiles of the patio below and shatter every arrogant bone in his body.

I wanted to prove to him that I was not the weak, miserable, useless creature that he thought me to be.

I looked at him balanced there on the railing. He was very tall. His cap brushed the underside of the roof. He had years of experience climbing in ship's rigging. How could he expect me to be as agile?

But as a child I had scrambled through the limbs of huge oaks with the agility of a young monkey. I had achieved the roof of our carriage house easily and walked the ridgepole more than once. That time on *The Savage Queen* I had been ready to clamber up the rigging to the tops for Captain Savage. Could Bram be right that I was no longer the same person? Had I lost the courage of those years? Was I really weak and miserable and useless now?

No!

Determined, I drew a breath to steady myself and asked him, "How shall I do it?"

"I'll go up onto the roof," he told me. "You climb up here where I am now. You can do that much, can't you?"

I nodded.

"I'll reach down and help you the rest of the way," he said. "All right?"

I nodded again and tried to swallow my heart down out of my throat.

Bram thrust a toe into the twining iron vines of the upright. Lifting himself on that leg, he grabbed the edge of the roof. He gave himself a shove with his foot and swung out, suspended by his arms. All in one graceful movement, he was pulling himself up, disappearing over the edge of the roof.

I leaned over the railing to look up. Bram's face appeared above me, his head silhouetted against the moon-bright sky. Holding his hands down to me, he said, "Come on."

I glanced at the patio below. My balcony had never seemed so high above the pavement before. If I were to fall—

"Don't look down," Bram told me.

I swallowed again. My heart still seemed lodged in my throat. Firmly, I told myself that I would not turn back.

I had my boots in one hand and hairpins in the other. Dropping the combs and pins into a boot, I tied the laces together and hung them around my neck. Then I grabbed the roof support and found a toehold in the ornamental iron railing. I hauled myself up to stand precariously balanced on the rail. Both of my hands clenched the upright with a death grip.

"Come on," Bram said again. He stretched his arms toward me.

I forced one hand to release the upright and reached for his fingers. I couldn't quite touch them.

He told me, "You'll have to climb a little higher."

I caught my lower lip between my teeth. Struggling for courage, I put my toe into the iron vines, as he had done, and lifted myself to stand on that foot. Then I reached again for his outheld hand.

Our fingers locked. His hand, wrapped around mine, felt very strong, very secure. Braced against it, I cautiously let go the upright and grabbed for his other hand. As I touched it, he caught hold.

He tugged gently.

Something in the steady, solid strength of his grip encouraged me. I let my toe slide away from its hold. Suddenly I was swinging out over the patio, held from falling only by Bram's hands locked onto mine.

I almost screamed.

With effort, I managed to choke back my fear. Bram's powerful arms were drawing me up. Then suddenly I found myself on the roof with my feet planted firmly on the tiles, and his arms around my waist.

He held me tightly. I saw his face close to mine, stark in the moonlight. His mouth was wide and mobile. His lips were slightly parted.

My body burned where it pressed against his. My heart trembled. More frightened of my own turbulent feelings than of the precarious roof, I tried to jerk free of his arms.

His mouth closed, drawing into a thin, hard line. Releasing me, he took a step back. His eyes were lost in the shadows under his brows.

For a moment he just stood there. Athough I couldn't see his eyes. I could feel his sullen, angry gaze. Then he turned

his head away, looking off across the roof. His voice was harsh and grating as he asked me, "Are you all right now?"

I could hardly find my own voice. I barely managed to whisper, "Yes. I think so."

But I wasn't all right. Not inside. My whole being was in a turmoil such as I had never known before.

5

Trying to keep up with Bram as we crossed the roof was frustrating. He moved easily, with the catlike grace and balance of a seaman. I danced awkwardly over the slippery tiles, clinging to his arm and fearing each step might be my last.

I thought of the juju Mammy Naomi had given me so long ago. It had been a reassuring comfort to me on my childhood adventure. I kept it as a memento, tucked away among the small treasures in my jewel box. Some ghost of past times whispered at the back of my mind that I should have brought it with me, that I was leaving my luck behind.

We reached the end of the roof and looked down on the stable. It was separated from the house by a narrow alley. The stable roof was a story below us, and several feet away from the wall of the house. I saw that a plank had been taken from the paddock fence and carried up to the stable roof. It was positioned to span the alley, with one end lodged against a tile of the stable roof, and the other resting somewhere against the wall of the house.

Bram pointed at it. "We'll go down that."

I could not see the end of the plank that rested against the house. It was far below the edge of the roof where we stood, and steeply angled. Certain such a descent was impossible, I gasped, "How?"

He told me, "I suppose I'd best carry you."

"In your arms?" I knew even he couldn't manage that.

"Have you ever ridden pickaback?" he asked.

My father had carried me that way at times, when I was very little, with my arms around his neck and my legs straddling his waist. Even before I was forbidden to climb trees, I was told that I was too old for such a game.

I certainly felt too old for it now, especially with Bram Ainsley.

When I objected, he asked if I could suggest a better way.

I couldn't.

"Then will you do it? Or shall I leave you here?" That was a threat. He knew as well as I that I couldn't get myself from the roof onto my balcony again without help. If he left me, I'd be trapped on the roof until someone else helped me

down. Then I would be confronted with demands for an explanation.

I answered him with a threat of my own. "Shall I scream?"

I didn't frighten him at all. He said simply, with a hint of mockery, "Then we'd both have some explaining to do."

Angered by my helplessness, I snapped at him, "My guardian would have you whipped! Have you ever felt the lash, Mister Ainsley?"

He snorted as if that amused him in a sardonic way. "Often enough."

Was there no way I could strike back at his insolence? I wanted to hurt him.

I remembered the things that the cook on *The Savage Queen* had said of Bram Ainsley. The words I had not understood had intrigued me and lodged in my mind. They came back to me almost as if the cook were whispering them into my ear: *'E be a whaler's bastard out of a New Bedford whore and 'is fingers be as sticky as pitch.*

I now understood what the cook had told me. I could not bring myself to speak some of the words. I had to satisfy myself with the lesser insult. "Was it for thievery you were whipped, Rat?"

He stiffened, and I sensed such a surge of anger in him that I feared he meant to strike me. I almost screamed as he lifted a hand. A blow from his powerful arm could send me tumbling from my perch on the roof.

He wiped his hand across his face. Then he astonished me by saying very quietly, "Shall I take you back to your room?"

I realized he meant it. If I said yes, there would be nothing more but the walk back across the roof and his lowering me to my balcony. Then he would be gone forever, and I would be safe where he had found me, with no one the wiser.

It would have been the sensible thing to do, but the spark of spirit in me that Bram Ainsley had driven into flame with his scorn now raged hot. To return to my room would be a defeat I would never forget. I answered him, "Take me to Captain Savage!"

In the same grimly quiet way that he had asked if I wanted to go back, he said, "I'll have to carry you."

"Carry me then!"

He crouched. I trembled with an emotion stronger than fear as I took my position astride his back. Cautiously, he lowered us both from the edge of the roof. Hanging by his hands, he found the plank with his feet. I clung desperately

to him as he worked himself down to kneel on it, then squirmed prone.

Once secure on the plank, he whispered, "I'd like to breathe."

I forced myself to ease my grip. His back heaved under me as he drew a deep breath. I felt the flexing of his body as he began to work his way slowly down the plank toward the stable roof.

My emotions were more frightening than the precariousness of our position. When finally we were on the stable roof and Bram was telling me to stand up, I was too weak to rise. My bones seemed hollow, burned empty by the fires within me. I amazed myself by obeying him, rising on legs so numb that I felt no control over them.

Once he was free of me, he got to his feet. He kept his back to me as he took the plank in, then dropped it to the ground. He never quite faced me as he gestured for me to follow him.

My legs remarkably carried me to his side. Unspeaking, he pointed down. A cart had been drawn up under the eaves of the stable. Bram said nothing but held his hands out to me. I knew he meant to lower me into the cart. I shuddered slightly as I put my hands into his. We knelt together on the edge of the roof and he helped me over. When my feet touched the bed of the cart, I eased my grip on his hands. Understanding without words, he let me go.

My knees buckled under me. Exhausted, I lay still in the cart. Bram swung himself from the roof and dropped lightly to my side. He asked softly, "Are you hurt?"

"No," I whispered, puzzled by the sound of sincere concern in his voice. Did he really care about my well-being? I wanted him to care.

But his next words rang with angry impatience. "Then don't just lie there. Come on. Captain Savage is waiting."

Bitterly, I told myself that any concern Bram Ainsley might feel was not for me but for himself. To him, I was just so much cargo to be delivered to his captain, and he simply wanted to get me there in one piece.

He offered me his hand. I refused it and got myself up. He climbed from the cart and offered me help descending. Again, I refused. Seating myself, I unslung my boots from my neck.

Determined to retain some dignity and some control over

my own actions, I said firmly, "I'm going to put on my shoes!"

He sighed as if exasperated, but he didn't argue. He just stood there watching as I shoved my foot into a boot. I rediscovered the handful of combs and pins I had dropped into it.

My face flushed with embarrassment as I pulled the boot off and emptied it. I thought Bram Ainsley must certainly be laughing at me. I didn't dare look at him. If I had seen a smirk on his face, I would have burst into tears.

Once I had the boots on, I pulled up my braids in a simple coronet. Working by feel, I thrust in the pins and combs to hold them. I expected Bram to damn my hair again, or at least snap at me to hurry. He didn't. He just stood waiting. When I had put in the last pin, I got to my feet.

He wheeled and walked off.

I knew he expected me to follow. I resented his rude presumption, but I had no choice. I followed.

He kept to the shadows until we were well out of sight of the hacienda. Then he left the woods for the road. We had gone only a short distance along it when he crossed the dunes that separated the road from the beach.

There was a small dinghy resting on the sand, just above the waterline. A single set of footprints led from it over the dunes. Beyond it, the sea sparkled under the bright moon. At a distance from the shore, I saw *The Savage Queen* at anchor.

She was larger than most of the coastal schooners; three-masted, with a raised quarterdeck. Her sails were furled. Her masts stood tall against the glowing, star-filled night. They swayed slightly as she rocked on the gently turning tide.

The sight of her, so proud and sleek and serene, eased some of the tension in me. Once aboard her, I would no longer be alone with Bram Ainsley. Captain Savage was waiting for me, like a father for his child. I paused, admiring the schooner and anticipating the warmth of the captain's welcome.

Bram was at the dinghy, facing me. He looked over his shoulder to see what I was gazing at. As he turned, I glanced at him The moon shadows played across his face when he looked at the ship. I could have believed he smiled. But when he faced me again, his expression was as grim as ever.

He didn't speak as he gestured for me to get into the dinghy. The silence between us was thick and heavy, like a dank fog filled with our contempt for each other. I kept my

head high, my attitude haughty, as I gathered my skirts and entered the small boat without his help.

As soon as I had seated myself, he shoved the dinghy into the water, then climbed in himself. To row, he sat facing me, but he avoided looking at me. Unshipping the oars, he fitted them to the locks and bent his back to them.

The tide was just swinging around. There was very little wind and the waves were light. His pull was strong. The dinghy shot out into the water toward the waiting schooner.

My thoughts ranged ahead of us to Captain Savage. My mind filled with fond memories of him. I marvelled that a man who had seemed so gruff and stern at first sight could have proven to be so warm and kind and gentle.

A bit of my conversation with Bram on the roof returned to my mind, and with it, a disturbing thought. I had not intended speaking to Bram again, unless he spoke first, but I voiced my question before I could recall my resolve. "It wasn't Captain Savage who whipped you, was it?"

He looked askance at me and gave a sharp nod.

I could hardly imagine my dear Captain Savage ordering a man to be lashed, unless that man had done something really terrible. I eyed Bram, wanting to make him admit to whatever horrible thing he had done to deserve such punishment.

"Why?" I asked.

"Stubbornness."

It was a curt, unsatisfying answer. I refused to accept it. Sarcastically, I said, "If that was all, why did you stay with him?"

"He's been good to me," he replied, as if that were so obvious I should have understood without being told.

I said with scorn, "Do you consider he was being good to you when he had you lashed?"

"Yes."

"That's ridiculous!"

I thought he started to reply, but he didn't. Instead of speaking, he gave a powerful pull of the oars that leaped our little boat toward *The Savage Queen.*

From the deck, the ship's watch called to us, "Aboy, dinghy! Mister Ainsley?"

"Aye," Bram shouted. "Stand by to take us aboard!"

I cocked a brow and looked again at the cap and jacket Bram Ainsley wore. "Are *you* an *officer* on *The Savage Queen?*"

"First mate," he grunted, swinging the dinghy up to the

schooner. He shipped the oars. Rising, he caught the line the watch threw to him. As he pulled the dinghy in against the schooner's side, he added bitterly, "Did you think I was still the galley rat?"

I gave a bewildered shake of my head. I hadn't thought about it at all. Despite his clothing, it hadn't occurred to me that the wretched boy I had known in the past could have become more than a common seaman. A ship's officer was as much an aristocrat at sea as a well-born gentleman was on land.

The man on watch dropped a Jacob's ladder to us. It was a floppy thing, all made of rope. Bram steadied it and once more held his hand out to me. This time I had to accept his assistance. I couldn't manage my skirts and get from the rocking dinghy onto the limp rope-ladder without help.

The watch was ready at the top of the ladder to boost me onto the deck. He was a tall black man, whose dark face gleamed in the moonlight. He greeted me with a respectful bob of his head and a rather shy smile.

His courtesy was a great relief to me after the treatment I had been receiving from Bram Ainsley. I revived a little of my battered poise. Nodding in reply, I graciously thanked him for his assistance.

Behind me, Bram swung himself nimbly up onto the deck and said to the watch, "How is the captain?"

"Still the same, sir," was the sad reply. "Shall I stow the boat now?"

Bram glanced at me before he answered, "Not yet."

He put his hand on my arm. I flinched at the touch. He jerked back the hand. I realized he had only meant to steady me against the rolling of the schooner's deck and to guide me. But I wanted none of his help.

Stepping away from me, he turned aft. "Come on."

A sudden gust of wind gave the vessel a heave I had not expected. My feet almost went from under me. I grabbed for support. My fingers closed tightly on the handiest grip, Bram's arm.

This time it was he who flinched. He darted a look at me. I hoped he couldn't see the embarrassment in my face.

The wind seemed to be rising. The schooner lurched again. I had to hang onto Bram as we made our way to the captain's cabin.

6

The captain's cabin was smaller than I remembered it being. There was a bunk built in against the back wall. The other walls were lined with cabinets. In the center of the room, taking up most of the space, was a flat-topped mahogany desk. An overhead skylight would let in the glow of the sun during the day. It was open to admit the balmy breezes, when I entered the cabin.

Captain Savage was seated in the chair behind the desk. Although it was just pleasantly cool, he had a shawl over his shoulders and a blanket over his knees.

The brass gimbal lamp above the desk was turned low. Its light didn't reach into the corners of the cabin. It barely illuminated the captain's face as he looked up at me.

He had changed terribly since I had seen him last. His lean face was wrinkled and drawn and looked oddly as if the two sides were somehow mismatched. His hair, which had been dark, peppered with gray, when I first met him, was almost white now. It hung lank about his face. He held his hands cradled in his lap. They lay limply together, as if they slept.

As he peered at me, his eyes caught the lamplight. The skin surrounding them was like old parchment, crushed and wrinkled and sagging, and there was phlegm in them, but the granite gray irises and the glistening pupils were exactly as I remembered, sharp and gleaming. His mouth widened in a smile that seemed warm though misshapen. "Laura, my girl!"

"Captain Savage, sir." I curtsyed, returning his smile. My joy at seeing him was mixed with dismay at the unfortunate changes in him.

He lifted one hand from his lap, shaking it free of the other as if only the one were under his control. Waving it toward a folding chair racked in a corner, he said to Bram, "Fetch the young lady a seat, Mister Ainsley."

Bram brought the chair over and set it up next to the desk. As I seated myself, I gave him a very aloof "Thank you."

Captain Savage's eyes darted from me to Bram and back again. One brow lifted slightly. He told Bram, "You may go now. Come back in about ten minutes."

"Aye, sir." Bram touched the bill of his cap and stalked out of the cabin.

Captain Savage looked at me. "Do you remember him?"

I nodded.

"What do you think of him now?"

I supposed I should make some polite and proper reply, but the cocky little girl the captain had awakened in me insisted on speaking her mind. Contemptuously, I said, "He hasn't changed!"

"You don't see any difference in him?"

"Oh, he's grown," I admitted. "And he's cleaner."

"He can read and write and figure as well as you, I'd vow," the captain said as if he were protesting some mild insult I had inadvertently made. "He can plot a course and sail it and buy a cargo and sell it and reckon the profit. He's got his captain's papers, girl. I've a new ship being laid down right now. She'll carry sail topside and steam in her belly. She'll not be calmed for lack of wind or stayed by the tides. She'll be the star of my crown. *The Savage Star,* I'll call her. He's a mind he'll be her skipper."

"Him!" I gasped in amazement. Bram Ainsley, the galley rat, master of a steamer!

"Aye, him!" The captain sounded as proud as if Bram were his own son. "I mind he'll have her, too. He gets what he wants, that boy. Learned it from me. Learned everything he knows from me, and learned it well."

I said, "He told me you had put the lash to him."

He chuckled. "Aye. More than once. I beat him like a dog to make a man of him. I knew he had the stuff in him, but he hadn't the sense to make use of it. It's shoal-running as learns a man the lead, and high winds as learns him the sheets. Nothing in this life worth having comes easy, girl. And what of you? I recollect when you'd a mind to be a ship's master yourself."

He said it as if it were an ambition I should have been able to fulfill. It seemed almost as if he were comparing me to Bram and asking if I had done as well. I dropped my eyes with a vague sense of having failed his expectations.

But what could he have expected of me? I was born to be a gentlewoman, and I was. I was betrothed to a man of breeding and position.

Lifting my chin, I met the captain's eyes again and used his own phrases. "I can read and write and figure. Perhaps I can't plot a course or sail a ship, but I've won the heart of a wonderful man. A *gentleman!*"

"Oh?" He didn't seem impressed. His brow wrinkled in a suggestion of a frown as he studied me.

His gaze was making me uncomfortable. I said, "And you, sir?"

He drew a breath and let it out in a weary sigh. "The world's done well by me, girl, and used me badly. Like my father before me and his father before him, I've made my fortune and lost it and made it again a time or more. I've a fine fortune now and I'm no longer fit to use it. One day I was sailing a fair wind, and the next I'd gone aground. My seams are sprung and I'm afeared I'll be breaking up before long. I've a mind to set my log and ladings straight while I've still a hand to do it."

"Surely this illness will pass!" I exclaimed, although I could see there was small hope of his ever recovering.

He gave me a wistful smile, just one corner of his mouth lifting. "It's what they call a stroke, girl. As the sawbones tell me, it's a kind of dying, piece by piece. I'm stove in, and there's no mending me now. But I've business to tend before I settle to the bottom with the other old hulks. You harken I've a family?"

I remembered he had told me of a son and two daughters. I nodded.

"In fact, I've two families," he said with a suggestion of bitterness. "There's my own; my boy, Wesley, and his sister, Henrietta, by my first wife. And there's poor Jennifer, by my second wife, Pauline. And then there's little Charlotte. She's my granddaughter out of Henrietta."

I tried to catalog the flow of names as he spoke them, but they confused me. I wondered if it mattered whether I remembered them.

"Then there's Pauline and her son by her first husband. I lost my first wife when Wesley and Henrietta were just children. I thought they needed a mother, so I took aboard a widow with a boy of her own. Pauline Marlin. Had me a notion she'd be good to mine." He shook his head as if he had been sadly mistaken. "A strong woman, Pauline is. A loving mother to that Hugh of hers. But I'd have been wiser to buy a black nanny for my own young'uns. Or even to have given them over into the keeping of a boarding master."

His acid tone shocked me. "You dislike the second Mrs. Savage?"

"*Dislike* is hardly the word," he grumbled. "If I'd the leave, I'd have cut the knot and sailed on years ago. But I

wed her in church and got her with Jennifer, and I'll not break my vow. Still, it's a pity the young have to suffer for an old man's mistake."

He looked intently at me. "Girl, I'm like to die, and it's a poor thing for me to go, leaving my children in the clutches of that woman. I've set my sign to my will and all my fortune, but the common widow's dower is to go to my boy, my blood son, Wesley. I thank God I was never fool enough to take title to that son of hers! But if she has her way, she'll rob the poor boy of it all for that damned whelp, Hugh!"

He had me thoroughly confused. "How can she rob your son if you've legally left everything to him?"

"Oh, she has her ways. She's a wily one. She hooked me into her drags, didn't she? She's got Wesley grappled, and he's a poor, weak creature without the will to fight her." That admission pained him. I could see the aching, the longing, the bitter disappointment in his weary eyes. "He's not much of a man. He needs a good wife to be keelson to him. He needs him a wife with the gut and the gall to face up to Pauline and face her down and scuttle her and that scurvy whelp of hers."

He glared at me. "Will you?"

"Sir?"

"Will you?" he demanded.

He frightened me. Thinly, I said, "Will I what?"

"What do you think I'm asking? Will you marry the poor boy?"

This was ridiculous! Impossible! He couldn't be saying such a thing. I had to be dreaming. I stared at him.

"Well?" he insisted. He moved as if to rise from his chair and tower over me. But he couldn't rise. His ailing body betrayed him. He sank back with a mournful sigh.

Softly, he said, "I need you, girl. You've the spunk. I know that by your coming here like this. I can see the fires burning in your eyes. You've the spirit to handle the affairs on land, and Bram will master the ships at sea. Between you, you can keep my business and my fortune out of that woman's grip!"

He had stopped bullying me and was almost pleading with me. With a pang of regret that I could not help him, I gave a slow shake of my head.

He seemed surprised and puzzled. "Why not, girl? Except that he's lacking for spine, my Wesley's a fine lad. He's in the prime of his life, and clever as the devil with the account books. Decent enough to look at, too. Takes after his mother more than me. He's a kindly boy. He'd be gentle with you.

You'd never suffer at his hand. And you've have a fortune at your command. That would pleasure you, girl. Believe me! You get your hand into it, you'll fancy the buying and selling and trading. And the fighting, girl! Think of the fighting! Think of the glory of sending that bitch to the bottom!"

I shuddered at his words. I did not have a violent nature. I didn't even know this woman he wanted me to destroy, or the man he wanted me to marry. The whole idea was preposterous. I was about to say so when it occurred to me that perhaps the captain's stroke had addled his mind. A surge of tenderness and pity for the old man came over me.

Impulsively, I rose and clasped his hand in mine. "Oh, Captain Savage! I'm sorry! I'm terribly sorry, but it's just impossible!"

"Why?" he asked.

"Can't you see? Can't you understand?" Tears were flooding into my eyes. Perhaps his reason was totally gone, I thought. I hoped I could make my position clear to him. I didn't want to hurt him. Not this kind old man who had been like a father to me. My voice caught in my throat. "It's—I—I'm already betrothed to a man I love dearly! He is desperately in love with me! We were meant for each other! I couldn't possibly marry someone else!"

"Easy, girl," he said gently. "You're befogged now. You take your time. It'll break light for you in a while."

Humoring him, I agreed. "Yes, let me think about it for a while."

"Take all the time you want." He smiled at me as he withdrew his hand from mine. His eyes left my face. He looked toward the doorway and said, "Mister Ainsley."

I wheeled and saw Bram standing there, looking as if he had been there for several minutes at least, listening to what I'd said. And thinking it a lot of foolish prattle, to judge from his expression.

He answered the captain, "Sir?"

"Take us home, Mister Ainsley."

"Aye, sir." Turning, Bram strode off.

I paused to say goodbye to Captain Savage. I was sorry to be leaving him, probably for the last time, but it was a relief to think that I would soon be back in my own room, away from the madness of this night's adventure.

I started to curtsy in parting but changed my mind. Impulsively, I stepped around the desk, bent, and gave him a peck of a kiss on the cheek. "Goodbye, Captain Savage."

He smiled at my kiss and cocked a brow at my words. "Goodbye? But, girl, you aren't going away."

Puzzled, I said, "What?"

"You'll stay on board while you consider my proposal. You'll come with us to Savage Key and meet Wesley. See Pauline for yourself. You'll come about, girl, when you've had a taste of the way the wind blows." He sounded absolutely sure of himself.

"No!"

From the deck above, I heard Bram Ainsley's strong voice calling for the dinghy to be brought aboard, and the sails to be hoisted.

"No!" I repeated, almost screaming. I lurched away from Captain Savage and ran for the door. Clutching my skirts, I scrambled up onto the deck.

The sails were rising in the moonlight, catching the growing wind. The schooner was beginning to heel. At the rail, the dinghy was being swung on board.

They couldn't do this! They couldn't sail while I was aboard! They couldn't refuse to put me ashore! This was kidnapping!

I turned frantically and saw Bram Ainsley on the quarterdeck. He glanced at me. The moonlight shadowed his eyes, but I didn't doubt they were filled with contempt for me. I knew he would never listen to my pleas to be set ashore.

For an instant, I was filled with a sense of complete helplessness. I was trapped! There was no way to escape—or was there?

I was an excellent swimmer, and *The Savage Queen* was still well in shore. If I could dive overboard, I could certainly swim as far as the beach.

I ran for the rail.

Bram must have realized my intention. He bounded from the quarterdeck after me. I reached the rail a scant stride ahead of him. As I started to climb over it, the vessel yawed. And Bram's strong hand caught my shoulder.

He jerked me back, spinning me. Off balance, I toppled against his chest.

His arms closed around me.

I looked up. His face bent to mine. A scream rose in my throat. It died as his mouth grabbed mine.

My whole being shuddered as I felt the surging heat of his kiss. My head whirled. Never in all my life had I ever been held or kissed in such a way. Waves of strange new emotion

swept through me. My hands fluttered like small creatures with life and will of their own. They slid under his open jacket and crept along his ribs, feeling the warm flesh and firm muscle under the fabric of his shirt.

His arms tightened about me. Despite my fears and my silently screaming conscience, my body pressed itself eagerly to his.

A shout snapped like the lash of a whip, shattering the moment. A crewman was calling excitedly, "Mister Ainsley! Sir! The fore staysail's fouled!"

At the sound of his name, Bram winced. I felt him draw taut. I sensed the flash of hesitation in him. And the bitter resignation with which he broke the kiss.

As he lifted his head, he looked for a moment into my face. I could not see his eyes. But I heard his voice, soft in his throat like the growl of a caged tiger. "Oh, God!"

It was not a curse. It was a moan of anguish.

Then he was drawing back from me. He shouted at the crewman, "Free it, dammit!"

I stood, shuddering, suddenly terribly cold without his arms around me.

The fouled sail was flapping wildly as the wind gusted, making a noise like the beating of monstrous wings. Suddenly the vessel heeled hard, pitching me back against the rail. Again, Bram grabbed me.

As his hand closed on my arm, I thought he meant to embrace me again—to kiss me again. My body trembled in anticipation. My mind cringed with fear. I dared not let him claim my mouth, or he might possess me totally. I flung up a protective hand before my face.

He did not take me into his arms. For an instant he gazed at me, his face unreadable in the shadows. Then he was pulling me along the rocking deck. I stumbled, and his grip on my arm tightened. He did not speak. His silence was grim as he dragged me below.

Roughly, he pushed me into a cabin. As he paused in the doorway he took the key from the lock and said in a voice like the threat of distant thunder, "I'll be back."

He slammed the door behind him. I heard the click of the key in the lock, then the clatter of his boots as he ran up to the deck again.

The cabin was lit only by thin shafts of moonlight sifting through the skylight above. It was a small room, much like the captain's cabin, with a table fastened to the deck in the

center of it. Overwhelmed by the violent turbulence of the emotions within me, I leaned against the table for support.

I stared at the door. Bram had locked it. He had locked me in. I was a prisoner here.

I knew this was *his* cabin. I could sense the echoes of his presence all around, as if he lingered in some shadowed corner gazing at me.

The warnings of the sisters at the convent were ringing in my mind like the clappers of a thousand bells. I had heard horrible stories about the lusts of men. In his arms, I had sensed the tigerish intensity of Bram Ainsley's will.

I did not doubt that when he returned, he intended to rape me.

My heart was pounding, my breast heaving with despair. My soul writhed within me When he held me, my body had betrayed me. It had answered his lust with desire. I cursed the weakness of my flesh. To be taken by any man against my will would be an unbearable horror. To be taken by Bram Ainsley, whose eyes held such contempt for me, would be beyond horror. To have him take me and have my body respond to his demands —to have it give him that satisfaction—

I swore to myself that I would die first!

Like a wild creature in a trap, I cowered against the table, my eyes darting. I hunted some way of escape.

There was only the one door.

As I expected, the knob refused to turn under my hand. I gave the door a shove. It felt very solid on its hinges. But the upper half was louvered. The louvers were just thin slats of wood. I thought I might be able to break them out one at a time if I had a tool of some kind to pry with.

I began to search the cabinets that lined the wall. The first one I opened was filled with books. Disappointed, I slammed that door and tried another.

In that cabinet, I found a small pitcher and basin, a brush and mug that smelled of shaving soap, a leather strop, and a razor.

I stared at the razor lying dimly defined by the moonlight. It was pale in color, as if the handle were ivory. The edge of the blade folded into it gleamed.

My hand went cautiously toward it. It offered me escape, I thought. If I couldn't find a way out of the cabin before Bram Ainsley returned, I could use it to kill myself.

My fingers were reluctant to touch it. I drew a steadying breath and closed them on it. My thumb pressed the spur at

the end of the blade, pivoting it from the sheath of the handle. It lay on my palm in the moonlight, a simple object with no will, no mind, no conscience. Untouched, it was only ivory and steel. Yet in a human hand it could become a cold and deadly weapon.

A weapon!

With a weapon, I could defend myself! Wielding it, I might be able to escape!

I flinched at the sound of boots pounding down the companionway ladder. Bram was returning. I darted to the door and pressed my back against the wall beside it. I stood with the open razor in my hand. My thoughts were jagged, my plan only half-formed. I had some notion of rushing past Bram when he opened the door—of holding him at bay with the razor while I reached the deck and leaped over the rail.

The key clicked in the lock.

I steeled myself to run. My every nerve was drawn taut. My hand was raised, the blade outheld, ready to threaten him.

"Miss Wickham?" he said as he opened the door and took a single step into the cabin. He stopped there, just inside the doorway. He left no room for me to dash past him. My hasty, half-formed plan collapsed. My lungs spasmed a gasping sob.

Bram wheeled toward the sound.

I felt my arm jerk. I felt the blade in my hand strike. It slid, slicing, and something warm splashed onto my hand.

Reeling back, Bram struck out. His arm slammed into mine, and the razor flew from my fingers. It clattered on the deck.

I cringed, certain that he would strike again. My eyes blinked shut in anticipation of the blow.

I heard Bram's voice, soft and bewildered. "What—?"

Forcing my eyes open, I saw him leaning against the door frame. His hands were pressed to his ribs. A dark stain was slowly spreading around them.

With horror, I realized it was blood.

I looked down at my own hand. At the warm, sticky stain on it. More blood! His blood!

I felt the deck pitch under me. The whole world seemed to yaw about me.

Dimly, I heard Bram call out, "Laura!"

He sounded frightened.

The terrible thought that I had murdered him exploded into my mind.

I fainted.

7

I awoke on the bunk in Bram Ainsley's cabin, with the crewman who had helped me aboard *The Savage Queen* watching over me.

When he saw my eyes open, he asked, "You want Mister Ainsley, ma'am?"

"Mister Ainsley?" I murmured, my mind still hazy. A single thought leaped to the fore, vivid as night lightning. "He's dead!"

The crewman grinned at me. "No, ma'am. He ain't hardly hurt at all."

My memories were returning in a tumble. I gasped, "The blood! So much blood!"

"Oh yes, there was a lot of that, ma'am," he agreed cheerfully. "You cut him wide, all right, but you didn't cut him very deep. Likely his rib bones got in your way. You want to cut a man through the ribs, you got to strike hard. You didn't cut him nearly deep enough."

"Not enough?" I mumbled, bewildered.

"No, ma'am. You ain't laid him up at all. I wouldn't have minded if you'd put him into his bed for a day or two."

Astonished, I asked, "You want him hurt?"

"No, ma'am. Not hurt much. Just a little to keep him off the deck a day or two. He's a hard master. A good master, but hard. You want me to fetch him to you now, ma'am?"

"No!" The idea of ever seeing him again appalled me. But the vessel was well under way. With both of us aboard, it would be almost impossible for me to avoid seeing him. Automatically, I glanced around the cabin—*his* cabin—as if I expected to discover him lurking in a dark corner. "He—where is he now?"

"Tony got him for'ard to stitch up that slice you took in him." He looked at me seriously. "You did hurt him, ma'am. He stood by to see you were berthed safe and well, but he was weakening fast with the blood running from out him that way. He had to get it patched. I expect he'll be back right quick when it's done."

"No!" I struggled to sit up. I was on Bram's bed. I had to get out of it. I had to get away before he returned.

As I tried to rise, my head spun. I pressed a hand to my brow.

"You sickly, ma'am?" the crewman asked with concern.

"I—I'm all right. Help me, please. I've got to see Captain Savage."

My legs were very weak and my head unsteady. I had to lean on his arm for support as he led me to the captain's cabin.

He knocked.

"Aye?" Captain Savage called.

"Sir, the ma'am wants to see you?"

"Laura? Send her right in!"

The crewman opened the door for me.

Captain Savage was seated at his desk, just as I had left him. He smiled at me. "You've considered? You've decided you will marry Wesley?"

"She be sick, sir," the crewman told him.

His smile disappeared. "Laura! What? Not seasick? Not you?"

I shook my head and it spun again.

"Here." The captain pointed at the chair by his desk. "Come, sit down. Tell me what's the matter."

Seated, I felt steadier. Captain Savage gave the crewman a nod of dismissal. He left, closing the door behind him. The captain looked at me expectantly.

Certain things were very difficult for a young woman of my upbringing to speak about. Certain words caught in my throat Struggling to express myself, I blurted, "Bram Ainsley assaulted me!"

The captain's eyes narrowed. "Girl, do you know what you're saying?"

Embarrassed, I lowered my lashes as I nodded.

He had no difficulty voicing the word I couldn't. "Rape?"

Faintly, I answered, "He tried."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Not Bram!"

This one night I had been insulted, manipulated, and humiliated. I had been kidnapped and frightened almost out of my wits. And now it seemed that Captain Savage was as good as calling me a liar. My pride was bent and battered, but not broken.

Lifting my lashes, I glared angrily at him. "He attacked me! He tried to—to—if I hadn't—he would—would—!"

"Hadn't what?" he asked.

"Injured him."

"Dammit, since I took sick they've been keeping things from me! How did you injure him, girl?"

I had expected compassion. I had thought the captain would rail at the seriousness of Bram Ainsley's offense against me. But here he was questioning me as if I were a prisoner at the docks, forced to defend myself. The crime was not mine. It was Bram Ainsley's.

I snapped, "With a razor! I—he—he threatened me and locked me in his cabin and when he came back I had his razor and I cut him!"

That shocked the captain. But his sympathy seemed to be for Bram, not me. *"Badly?"*

The memory of blood leaped to my mind. So much blood. For an instant I felt sickly ashamed. I had spilled the blood of a fellow human being.

No, I told myself, Bram Ainsley was hardly a *fellow human being*. If he could commit assault upon a lady such as I, he certainly deserved no more consideration than a vicious animal.

Even so, I was glad to be able to tell the captain, "That crewman said it wasn't serious. He said that Mister Ainsley wouldn't even be laid up."

Captain Savage smiled with relief.

That made me even more angry. I added, "He said he wished I had cut deeper! He said Mister Ainsley is a hard master!"

"A hard master, eh?" He seemed amused.

How could he be so callous! Why couldn't I make him understand!

"Bram Ainsley attacked me! He tried to—to—oh, I wish I had killed him!"

"Now, child, you don't mean that."

I had risen in my anger. I leaned on the edge of the desk, braced against the rolling of the ship. Scowling, I demanded, "I want to go home!"

He gave a shake of his head. His eyes sparkled as if my anger pleased him. With his good hand, he opened a drawer of his desk and brought out a bottle. He set it on the desk, then put two glasses beside it. "Pour, will you, girl? My hand's not so steady as once it was."

I kept glaring at him. "Send me home! Now!"

"With Bram? Back the way you came?" He seemed to be teasing me.

I swallowed at the sudden lump in my throat. The idea of being alone again with Bram Ainsley terrified me.

"Girl, I'm sure you've built up a little gust into a whole hurricane," the captain said quietly. "Bram's not a lad for such foolishness. I told you I have a new vessel abuilding, a steamer I'll call *The Savage Star*. She'll be the finest coaster in the country."

I couldn't see that his new ship had anything to do with the matter at hand.

He went on. "Bram's an ambitious lad. He knows the favor I hold him in. I mean to make him the master of *The Star* now that I'm not able to take her myself. Bram wants that. He wouldn't do anything to jeopardize his chance for it. Not *anything*."

I had been told that lust could drive a man to acts of madness. I said so to the captain, adding, "He's like an animal! A wild tiger!"

He only chuckled. "Oh, he's got violence in him, well enough. It's part of the fire that drives him. But he's got the sense and will to keep it in check."

I shook my head. "He *attacked* me!"

I could see that he still didn't believe me. He was just humoring me when he asked, "Do you want him punished? Do you want him put to the mast? Lashed?"

"Yes!"

His amusement faded before my rage. He peered at me. "If it's true he's done what you say, I'll have his back bared to the bone."

I shuddered at the image. My voice came in a thin squeak. "No!"

"Then what is it you want done to him?"

"I -I just want him to stay away from me," I said weakly. It seemed a feeble punishment for the crime I had accused him of.

The captain cocked a brow at me. "Pour that rum, will you, girl? And tell me exactly what happened."

I welcomed the moment to collect my wits. Opening the bottle, I filled one glass. He nudged it toward me and gestured at the other. I shook my head in refusal. He shrugged, leaving me to my own decision, downed a bit of his drink, then asked me again just what had happened.

Sketchily, I told him how Bram had grabbed me and kissed me on deck, then hauled me roughly below and locked me in his cabin.

There were tears in my eyes, and my words were catching in my throat as I concluded, "When he left me there, he said he was coming back to—to—"

Gently, he asked, "Did he actually say it to you, girl?"

I couldn't really remember.

Seeing my hesitation, he said, "He *did* make it clear to you? You're certain of his intention?"

I nodded.

"How would you have me punish him?"

"I—I don't—I just want to go home!"

Apologetically, he said, "I *can't* let you go. But I'll not have you suffer while you're aboard my vessel. I swear that to you. I'll speak to Bram. I'll give him good warning to steer clear of you. If he speaks ought a word to you, except it's ship's business, I'll lay the lash to him. Will that ease your fears?"

I nodded. But I protested, "I want to go home!"

"Come, listen, understand me, girl. I've been master of my own vessels for a long time. That gives a body a notion everyone will jump to his orders. It was foolish of me to expect you'd agree to marry my boy just because I told you to. If you're the girl of spirit that I want for him, you'd *have* to balk at such an order. I know that. I just wasn't thinking—"

"I'll never marry him! I'll never marry anyone but Don Orlando!"

"You've got the right to make your own decision, but I'll not let you make the wrong one just for lack of understanding. You come on to Savage Key with me. Meet my boy Wesley. Meet that bitch of a stepmother I had the misfortune of giving to him. You'll be convinced, girl. I know it."

"No!"

He sighed as if he were weary of trying to reason with me. Sternly, he said, "You listen, my fine little frigate! You've really small choice in the matter. When this vessel leaves me off at Savage Key, she's going on to New Orleans with Bram Ainsley as master. If you don't land on the key with me, then you'll stay aboard with him. That's the choice you've got, you hear?"

I shuddered to think of being left on the ship at Bram's mercy. "You wouldn't!"

"No need, girl. No need." His tone became soothing. "You come to Savage Key with me, and we'll tell my family you're the daughter of an old friend, just visiting a while. That's all. Bram will take *The Queen* on to New Orleans and stop back

by the key on his way south again. By then, if you're still of such a damned stubborn mind to go back to Havana and this Don Orlando of yours. I'll send you home with a pair of husky lads to guard your body and a chaperone to guard your good name. Well enough?"

I could see no alternative. But I protested once more, "I want to go home now!"

"Answer me sensibly, girl! Will you come to Savage Key with me or sail on to New Orleans with Bram Ainsley?"

Reluctantly, I said, "I'll go with you."

"Good!" He smiled in the same warm, affectionate way he had so often when I was a child. I thought he didn't really mean me any harm. He simply had this strange, impossible idea and refused to let it go.

He motioned for me to fill his glass with rum again. I did. He took a drink, then said, "Now, my boy Wesley is a sensitive lad. A damned decent young'un to have come up under such a bitch as Pauline. He'd never consent to the marriage if he was to know the scheming behind it. So you must swear to me you'll not tell anyone what's passed between us here. Understand? Not anyone at all!"

I gave a small, weary nod. It hardly seemed important. I told myself that in time this horrible nightmare would be over and I would be safe in the arms of my beloved Don Orlando. Until then, I had best humor the captain and avoid Bram Ainsley, and pray for a quick passage.

8

The Savage Queen had no quarters for passengers. There were only the two cabins and the fo'c'sle. I would not ask Captain Savage to abandon his quarters to me. I had to accept the other cabin for my stay on the vessel.

Even with the door locked from the inside, and the captain's promise of protection, I doubted that I would be able to sleep that night. Bram Ainsley's aura was too intense in the small room. It clung about the bunk with an appalling intimacy. I felt as if he were there, watching me with those tiger eyes.

For a while, I sat at the table. In time, exhaustion drove me to the bunk. I did not undress but lay down fully attired. Resting, I recalled that once before a vessel had borne me thus, away from home to an unknown place. But then I'd had the presence of my family to comfort me.

The War Between The States had taken turns we of the south had hardly expected Our young men died in battle, and our resources were depleted. When news came that Atlanta had fallen to a huge force of Yankees called Sherman's Bummers, we in Savannah realized that our city, and our cause, were doomed.

Papa reached home just before the Yankees reached the Ogeechee River. He came in at night, silently, like a thief. There were no gifts this time, and there was no joyful laughter. Only a terrible sense of urgency. As a blockade-runner, Papa knew what would happen to him if he were captured. He feared what might happen to his family if we were to fall into the hands of his enemies.

Carrying only a few meager necessities, we fled to his ship and slunk out to sea.

Papa did a good deal of business in Cuba and had many friends there, noblemen as well as merchants and factors He made arrangements for Don Pedro Hernandez to take mother and me under his protection. Once we were settled in the hacienda of Don Pedro, Papa and Miles sailed for Bermuda.

We never heard of them again.

Then the yellow fever took Mama, and I was alone.

I had become the ward of Don Pedro, and in time my life assumed a comfortable pattern filled with promise for the fu-

ture. I had met Don Orlando, a beautiful young man who looked at me with deep, dark, soulful eyes such as I had read of in novels.

He was the first man who ever looked at me as if I were no longer a child, but truly a woman. His gallant attentions overwhelmed me. I felt an absolute certainty that he was the man my mother had spoken of—the one who would someday come to win my heart and take my hand in marriage.

As *The Savage Queen* bore me away from my home in Cuba toward some unknown, I told myself that when Don Orlando learned I was missing, he would be distraught. Most certainly he would seek me. No matter where I might be taken, no matter what might happen, he would surely search for me. Whatever the obstacles, somehow my true love would find me.

Comforted by that thought, I finally drifted into sleep.

In the morning, a crewman brought me breakfast on a tray. To my amazement, I discovered I was ravenously hungry.

As I ate, I considered my situation. Encouraged by the bright glow of the sun beaming through the skylight overhead, I decided that I would not endure this entire voyage behind a locked door from fear of Bram Ainsley. After all, I had Captain Savage's promise of protection.

When I finished breakfast, I put my hair in order and brushed the wrinkles from my dress as best I could. Then, with my head high, I walked defiantly out of the cabin.

On deck, I looked all around for Bram Ainsley but failed to spot him. Where had he spent the night? I wondered. In the fo'c'sle with the crew, or on the deck with a tarpaulin for his bed? It rather pleased me to have turned him out of his comfortable quarters. True, that was a very small punishment for the indignities he had heaped upon me, but even such a little taste of revenge was sweet.

The Savage Queen was carrying deck cargo. Sturdy wooden crates blocked my view of the bow. The vessel was running well to a quartering wind and heeled to port. I climbed the slope of the deck to the starboard rail. When I reached it and looked ahead, I saw Bram Ainsley.

His back was to me. He was standing at the rail with his arm braced around a foremast shroud. His stance was weary as he gazed at the horizon. He appeared lost in deep, private thought.

Like a child fascinated by fire, I felt a curious compulsion

to approach him. Clinging to the rail, I made my way forward. I was almost immediately behind him before he became aware of a presence and turned. Surprise flashed in his face when he saw that it was I.

He looked gaunt and tired, as if he had not slept at all that night. He hadn't shaved. The stubble of his beard was so blond that it was hardly visible, but it softened the sharp line of his jaw.

His coat hung loosely over his shoulders. He was wearing no shirt or undershirt. I saw the wide bandage wrapped around his ribs, and the pale golden hair on his bare chest. My fingers tingled with an odd desire to touch the mat of hair and the hard muscle under it.

Momentarily, I felt a surge of compassion, an urge to offer comfort for the wound that I had inflicted on him. But a glance into his eyes drove that tender emotion from me.

He glared at me with such sullen anger and burning contempt that my soul cringed.

"What damned lies have you been telling Captain Savage about me!" he demanded.

My pride bristled at his accusation. "I told no lies!"

"I've run against the wind and sweated and bled for what I have within my grasp," he said, as if I had flung a challenge at him. "You've always despised me, but you won't take *The Savage Star* from me!"

His hands clenched. I winced with fear that he meant to hit me, and gasped, "You wouldn't dare!"

"I'd dare the devil himself for *The Star!*"

"If you strike me, Captain Savage will have you flayed!" As I spoke I darted a glance at the threatening fists.

He looked down at his hands as if surprised to discover them clenched. Opening them, he wiped one across his face. I saw that his brow was covered with perspiration. A muscle jerked at the corner of his jaw.

An astonishing sense of power filled me as I realized that *he* feared *me*. He was desperate for command of the new steamer. Captain Savage could give him that command or withhold it from him. And I could influence the captain.

"I've only to scream and you'll go to the mast! Captain Savage will be done with you forever!" I said viciously, although I had no intention of screaming. No matter how I felt about Bram Ainsley, I couldn't have a man lashed. But I wanted him to know something of the terrible despair I had felt when I was helpless in his power.

I met his eyes with fierce defiance. For a moment, he gazed at me as if attempting to see deep into my very being. Then he wheeled and strode away. He never faltered at the leaping of the deck underfoot but hurried out of my sight as if he were fleeing me.

We had battled and I had won, I thought with elation. But the sense of elation dissolved as quickly as it had come.

I stood for a while much as he had stood, my hand braced on the shrouds and my face toward the distant horizon. The mist of spray the sea wind flung against my cheeks stung like tears. I tasted salt on my lips. My eyes saw nothing of the beauty of the day, only the emptiness of the vista before me.

When I encountered Bram Ainsley again, he looked through me as if I had no existence at all for him. I responded in the same manner. So we went about our lives within the limited confines of the schooner, carefully ignoring each other, although I must admit that I did steal glances at him when he was too busy to notice.

There was something about him that fascinated me. I was intrigued by the strong masculine grace of his stride and the way he would tilt his head when he studied the set of the sails or the distant clouds.

I decided that the crewman was right in calling him a hard master. I never once heard him shout an order without a harsh edge to his voice. He cursed the men unmercifully. Yet he never extended any worse punishment than the vitriol of his words. That seemed enough. A man singled out by his anger cringed as if physically beaten. They all jumped smartly at his least order.

He seemed always on duty. When I strolled out on deck in the morning, he was there When I went below in the evening he was still on deck. And as I lay in the bunk at night, I recognized his pacing footsteps above.

He kept the schooner under steady sail. Soon we had passed the Dry Tortugas and were into the Gulf of Mexico. To starboard, Florida became visible as a low band of green on the horizon.

The weather remained fair, the sun warm and bright in the intensely blue sky. At midday fluffy, white puffs of cloud would begin to build over the land and drift toward us, but they did not bring us rain.

Richard, the crewman who brought my breakfast and occasionally chatted with me, told me that in a few weeks it

would all change. Then the clouds would thicken into lead gray masses by midafternoon, and pour out rain as they raced across the land into the Gulf. By midsummer there would be frequent squalls that could toss the schooner like a dog playing with a bone, growling thunder and snapping with fangs of lightning.

When I asked if they dared to sail in such weather, he laughed boldly and replied that they sailed when and where the master chose and the wind would take them.

I spent much of my time aboard, leaning on the rail, watching the white, wispy clouds accumulate over the land. The time passed slowly. I considered entertaining myself by reading some of the surprisingly large collection of books that were in Bram Ainsley's cabin, but when I picked one up I found myself so sensitive to the aura of his presence lingering about it that I quickly put it down again. So I idled away the hours on deck, staring into the distance.

I was doing just that when Richard came to my side and told me we were within sight of Savage Key.

"Where? Which one is it?" I asked him. The coast we sailed seemed almost entirely lined with keys and small islands. Some were hardly more than sandbars. Others looked covered with jungles of impenetrable growth. None appeared inhabited.

"There." He pointed well ahead off the starboard bow. "The one with the village on it."

I had been under the impression that the captain's family lived in isolation on Savage Key. With surprise I said, "Savage House is in a village?"

"Oh no, ma'am," Richard replied. He explained that the village was only a small settlement of Spanish Indian fisherfolk on the southern tip of the key. The captain's house was located far from it, at the northern end. There were no other settlements or habitations nearer than the little cattle-port of Punta Blanca that we had passed during the night.

This section of the coast was ill suited for human habitation. Most of the mainland here was lined with mangrove swamps, dark, thick masses of vegetation rising from murky water that swarmed with snakes, alligators, and noxious insects.

Savage Key was a long, narrow ridge of land paralleling just such a swamp. The only access to it was by water. The Indian village at its southernmost point was merely a small cluster of insubstantial buildings huddled together in a clear-

ing. From the deck of the schooner, I could see a few fishing boats drawn up on the glistening sands of the beach, and a few barely discernable figures moving among them.

Beyond the village clearing, the key was covered by a forest of palmetto and pine and tropical shrubs. Although I gazed intently ahead, I could not see Savage House.

I still had not caught sight of it when Bram began to shout orders. Richard had to leave me. I continued to scan the key while the crew shortened sail. The cant of the deck eased as the schooner slowed its pace.

At last Savage House came into view.

It was a large, somber building set well back from the beach and flanked by gnarled, moss-draped old oaks. The roof was steeply pitched, its slates a dark gray. The clapboard walls looked as if they had never known paint. They were weathered a gray almost as dark as the roof. A covered veranda ran across the front and sides of the first floor. It sat high above the ground on foundation columns of stone.

A path led from the veranda steps across a wide yard of sand and weeds to the beach, where a plank walk connected it to a small dock. There was a skiff tied up at the dock.

The Gulf was shoal on this shore. Even a shallow draft vessel such as *The Savage Queen* did not dare go in close enough to tie up at the little dock. We hove to at a distance from it and dropped anchor. Bram called for the dinghy to be lowered.

It occurred to me that Captain Savage would need help getting ashore. I hurried to his cabin to offer my assistance.

I found him already prepared for the departure. His personal possessions had been cleared from the cabin and packed into a chest that sat waiting by his door.

He was dressed in his best uniform, with his whiskers and hair neatly trimmed. He sat at the desk, the rum bottle before him and a glass in his hand. The smile he gave me as I entered was wistful and weary.

"*Aye, and the day returns too soon,/ Yet we'll go no more arowing/ By the light of the moon,*" he said.

I recognized the quote as a fragment from the poetry of Lord Byron. It was a love lyric, and I knew he meant it for his vessel. In a few minutes, he would be leaving *The Savage Queen* for the last time. Tears of sympathy welled in my eyes.

"Here, girl!" he said, forcing cheer into his voice. "Home at last, eh? I reckon you're looking forward to meeting my boy Wesley?"

I nodded in agreement, although in truth I had no interest whatever in meeting Wesley Savage. I wanted only to get this ordeal over with and return to my dear Don Orlando.

Footsteps sounded in the companionway. I recognized Bram Ainsley's strong, quick tread. So did the captain. As Bram reached the door, the captain called out to him, "Just in time, lad! Come on in! Join us!"

I stepped back away from the door, making room for Bram to enter the small cabin. As he brushed past me, my heart pounded foolishly. I hardened my face in grim determination not to betray the effect of his nearness on me.

His eyes hesitated on mine for the briefest part of an instant. Then they slid past me to fasten on Captain Savage. He tried to ignore my presence and behave as if I were not there at all. But I was, and he resented it. I could tell that by the way his shoulders stiffened.

A cold, constrained edge of formality crept into his voice as he addressed the captain. "Ready to go ashore, sir?"

"A moment more, son," Captain Savage said. Reaching into a desk drawer, he brought out a fresh drinking glass and handed it to Bram.

Bram filled it from the bottle, paused, then admitted my presence by offering it to me.

The gesture might have been considerate, but I took it as an insult. I felt he was implying I was no better than those dockside women who reveled in drunkenness with seamen.

He did not speak as he held the glass out to me, nor did I speak in reply. I answered him with a look of indignation and haughty aloofness.

He turned sharply away from me.

The captain glanced at me with what appeared to be disappointment. Then he raised his glass toward Bram in toast. "To the old *Savage Queen*. And to the new steamship. I give you *The Savage Star*, lad. She was my dream for a long time. Now she's yours."

He sipped his rum, then smiled over the rim of the glass at Bram and added, "*Captain* Ainsley!"

Pride flushed Bram's face. He leaned back his head and emptied his glass in a swallow.

"That's not grog, lad," Captain Savage said jovially. "That's the very best Jamaican rum. Take your time with fine things. Don't let impatience be your ruination."

Bram grinned at him.

I was suddenly very aware of the intimacy between these

two men. I felt as if I were intruding in a very personal private matter between father and son, and my presence there was tarnishing the moment for Bram.

I told myself that Bram Ainsley's feelings were none of my concern. He certainly had shown no consideration for my feelings. And I was entitled to be there. Captain Savage had been like a second father to me. He cared for me enough to want me as a wife for his son. Bram Ainsley was only a hireling.

Bram refilled the glasses and toasted the captain. This time he drank more slowly, savoring the rum. When both glasses were empty, Captain Savage drew a deep breath. He looked at Bram with weary resignation. "I'm ready, lad."

Bram started around the desk. "I can carry you to the deck, sir."

"The hell you will! I'm not be borne about like a babe in arms!"

"But sir, you can't—"

"Here, girl!" The captain gestured for me to come to his side. "Give an old man your arm. You're a strapping lass, even if you are a little one. You can do it. Bram, you take the other arm. Between you both, I'll at least be standing with my feet under me for my last steps on the deck of *The Savage Queen.*"

We did as he wished. Together, we hoisted him from the chair. He hung almost helpless between us as we maneuvered him through the narrow doorway and up onto the deck.

There we paused while he took one last long look around the vessel that had been his true home—his life—for so many years.

Seeing us, Richard hurried to take my place at the captain's side. I watched, feeling useless, while he and Bram lowered the captain into the dinghy.

Once he was settled, I followed. When I was safely seated, Richard took the oars, while Bram steadied the captain, and we headed for our landing on Savage Key.

9

A sling had been used to lower Captain Savage from the deck of the schooner into the dinghy. Although the seas were not actually heavy, the winds and waves were rough. It would be difficult, perhaps even dangerous, to attempt lifting the captain from the boat onto the dock without a hoist of some kind. Bram instructed Richard to pull for the beach instead of the dock.

Richard drove the little craft in as far as he could with the oars, then bounded over the side and hauled at the painter. His strength and the lift of a rolling wave carried us in a bit more, but with the weight of three people on board, he could not drag the dinghy clear of the surf.

"That's good enough," Bram called to him when the dinghy refused to budge further at his pull. "Hold her there or she'll float back when I get out."

Keeping the painter taut as Bram rose, Richard asked, "Don't you want me to help you with the captain, sir?"

"You'll have to hold the boat, keep her steady," Bram replied. He turned to the captain. "I'm afraid I'll have to carry you this time, sir."

Captain Savage sighed at the indignity of being taken ashore like a babe in arms.

I suggested, "I can help!"

"And get your fine boots wet?" Bram said sharply as he stepped from the boat into the water.

For the sake of Captain Savage's pride—and my own—I scrambled into the ankle-deep surf and offered the captain my assistance.

Bram said nothing. Not a word of appreciation for my help or apology for his scorn. He simply moved around the boat, allowing me to step in at the captain's side and take his good arm over my shoulder. Together, as we had done on the schooner, we got the captain to his feet. Supporting him between us, we waded through the surf.

People had come onto the veranda of Savage House to await our arrival. There were three women and a man. I wondered if he were Wesley Savage. It irritated me that he just stood watching while we got the captain out of the

dinghy and carried him through the water onto the beach. I commented that it seemed ill mannered of him not to come help us.

I was expecting Bram to be as scornful of him as I was. Contempt seemed to come easily to Bram Ainsley. But his tone was oddly gentle as he said, "Not Wesley."

"Hush, girl," the captain said. "Meet the boy before you judge him. Get to know him. To understand him. He has a good heart."

Once we were across the beach and struggling up the low sand dunes that separated it from the yard, Wesley Savage hurried from the veranda to meet us.

One of the women followed him. She started to run. Her foot slipped in the loose sand and she fell.

"Jen!" Bram shouted with concern.

Captain Savage called, "Jennifer, child! Are you hurt?"

Wesley wheeled to help her. But she didn't need his aid. Quickly on her feet again, she brushed at her skirts and replied to the captain, "No, father! I'm quite all right! And you?"

"A little trouble, Jen. I'm afraid I'll be at home for a while this time," he said, obviously trying to make light of his severe illness.

She darted a questioning look at Bram as if she knew him well enough to expect frankness from him. He didn't speak, but the grim expression in his eyes gave her an honest reply. She clasped her hands in distress.

She was a small girl, perhaps a year or two older than I, but hardly taller. Her hair was a mass of dark brown curls caught in ribbons at the back of her head. Her thin, pale face was very pretty in a fragile way. I felt a twinge of envy at her delicate complexion, unmarred by the least hint of a freckle.

She looked at the captain with solemn affection. As I recalled, Jennifer was the younger of his daughters, the child of his second wife. That made her half sister to Wesley.

I glanced curiously at Wesley Savage, the man the captain wanted me to marry. He appeared to be in his late twenties, although he had a quality about him that put me in mind of a shy little boy. He was of medium height, slightly built and stylishly clean-shaven. His eyes were the same shade of granite gray as his father's, but they reflected none of the captain's aggressive boldness. His thin mouth had a quirkish twist that gave it a look of sad resignation.

When Captain Savage introduced me to the two of them, Jennifer greeted me with a warm smile, and Wesley gave me a charmingly old-fashioned bow. He eyed me with interest and a kind of wistful admiration, as if my arrival were a very pleasant surprise and he feared I might disappear again as suddenly as I had come.

Offering his help, he took my place at the captain's side and we headed toward the house. Jennifer asked anxious questions about her father's condition. She seemed to be addressing them to Bram rather than the captain. But it was the captain who replied, trying to reassure her with forced joviality.

When we reached the veranda, Captain Savage introduced me to the two women waiting there. One was his wife Pauline. She was in her middle years, somewhat younger than the captain. Her hair, worked into an attractive coronet, showed only a few traces of gray. She was tall with a willowy slenderness I recalled the captain saying she had a grown son by her previous marriage. Childbearing had not thickened her waist or weakened her bustline.

It was from Pauline that Jennifer had inherited her fragile beauty. Pauline's face was a perfect oval with trim brows arching over wide-set, blue green eyes. Her nose was classic and her mouth was full, yet delicate. Her skin was firm, although the years had begun to form dark hollows under her eyes and etch fine lines at their corners. Slightly deeper lines bracketed her mouth, giving it a somber quality, as if she seldom smiled.

As Captain Savage introduced us, I felt a sharp pang of pity for her. Her face, obviously once remarkably lovely, was now horribly scarred by the pits of smallpox.

She welcomed me politely, but I could tell she was puzzled and somewhat disturbed by my unexpected arrival.

The other woman on the veranda was the captain's daughter by his first wife. Her name was Henrietta. She was married to Pauline's son, Hugh Marlin. Like Wesley, Henrietta had inherited her father's sandy hair and gray eyes. She wore her hair drawn back in an unbecoming bun. Wisps of it refused to stay put, straggling untidily around her face. Under brows too heavy for a woman, her eyes seemed hooded, as if her thoughts continually turned inward. A frownlike crease between her brows suggested those thoughts were not always pleasant ones.

Her features were not ill shaped, but they were quite plain.

Her mouth was wide and hard set. Although I knew her to be a little younger than Wesley, she appeared older, as if life did not wear well for her.

She studied me narrowly as I was introduced to her. The crease between her brows deepened. Under her gaze, I felt thoroughly examined, like some animal brought to the block for sale.

When the brief introductions were completed, Bram and Wesley took Captain Savage on into the house and up to his bedroom. Jennifer hurried along with them. Pauline stayed with me long enough to show me into a parlor. Excusing herself to attend her husband, she promised to return soon.

Alone, I sat down on a sofa and pulled off my sodden shoes. I was happy to have a few minutes by myself to collect my thoughts and consider my surroundings.

The parlor was large with a high ceiling. The walls were half paneled in some dark wood. Heavy plum-colored drapes were drawn over the windows, blocking out much of the afternoon sunlight. There was a thick, beautifully patterned Persian carpet on the floor.

The furniture was a curious assemblage. Each piece was handsome by itself, but they had been brought together without any apparent regard to how well they might mix. An Italian armoire of walnut, intricately carved, painted and gilded, which would have been appropriate in a sixteenth-century palace, appeared at odds with the slender, severe Sheridan chair next to it and the homey, winged Queen Anne sofa I sat upon. A stiff, square-shouldered Hepplewhite secretary nearby seemed to frown sternly on the ornate frivolity of the armoire.

The mantelpiece of a common, brick fireplace held ormolu candlesticks dripping with crystal prisms, several colorful Chinese vases of exquisite porcelain, and a medieval-looking ewer of fine goldwork set with polished stones.

Parlor statuary of marble, of alabaster, and of bronze peeked from the shadowy corners. An oriental lamp of pierced brass hung from the ceiling.

The odd assortment of furnishings reminded me of a comment Richard had made aboard ship. Grinning as if in jest, he had told me that Captain Savage's grandfather—the one who built this house—was rumored to have been a pirate. I had laughed then. Now I found it easy to believe this parlor had been furnished with loot from ravaged vessels of bygone years.

It occurred to me that various things I had heard the captain say suggested he had begun his own seafaring career as a smuggler, working at his father's side. The idea did not dismay me so much as it should have. Although some of the pirates and smugglers I had read about in novels had been bloodthirsty and evil, others had been quite dashing and romantic. The notion that I might be in the den of one intrigued me.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a horse cantering toward the house Since there was no one about to observe such unladylike behavior, I tiptoed to the window to satisfy my curiosity.

The rider I saw approaching was a tall young man on a handsome bay thoroughbred. He gave a shout as he neared the house. By the time he reached the veranda, a manservant had run to meet him. He handed over the reins and strode up the steps. He was well dressed, broad-shouldered, and almost as tall as Bram Ainsley. His carriage was quite proud. In some way I could not define, he reminded me of Don Orlando.

I thought him rather handsome.

As he crossed the veranda, I ducked back to the sofa and seated myself demurely, in case he happened to come into the parlor. Suddenly I remembered my bare feet. I hadn't time to put on my boots. Tucking my feet up, I pulled my skirts carefully into place to cover them.

I had barely arranged myself when I heard him enter the hall. The parlor door was open. From the corner of my eye, I saw him glance through it. He halted sharply at the sight of me, smiled, and came toward me.

His features were rather like those of classic Grecian sculpture. His forehead was high and his chin was firm with a pronounced cleft. Although he was cleanly and closely shaven, his jaw had a bluish cast. His nose was patrician, marred only by a thickening flare of the nostrils. His mouth was very full, the lower lip turning softly down and showing a good deal of color. His thick, drooping eyelids gave his blue eyes a languid look.

The riding coat he wore was of cheviot, cut in the English manner, and perfectly tailored to complement his athletic form. His trim breeches were tucked into hunting boots of fine calf. His collar and cravat were immaculate, the one of linen, the other of silk.

He dropped his gloves on the sofa beside me, then doffed his well-brushed beaver and set it atop them.

"Well, hello there!" he said, leaning over me. He came much too close. His nearness was overwhelming. It made me feel quite uncomfortable. So did the odors that clung to him. Along with the smell of saddle leather, there was a strong scent of Macassar oil, and a muskiness that I found disturbing. It both tantalized and repelled me.

Shrinking back from him, I stammered a hello.

"I hardly expected such a delightful surprise, my pretty. Did you just arrive here on *The Savage Queen* or are you a gift of Providence?" His voice was a throaty, insinuating purr that sent shivers along my spine. I felt stirrings in my body and a tingling in my blood akin to the strange new feelings that Bram Ainsley's embrace had aroused in me. With Bram, there had been a sweetness to the sensations, but with this man they were repugnantly cloying.

I wanted to flee him or at least move away from him. But I could not bring myself to reveal my bare feet. It would have been too embarrassing. I was trapped there on the sofa.

Struggling to maintain my composure, I said stiffly, "I do not believe we have been introduced."

He straightened up. With mocking exaggeration, he peered all around the room as if he were looking for someone in its dark corners. Then he said, "I'm afraid there is nobody here to do me that favor. Please allow me to speak for myself. I am Hugh Marlin, master of this house."

I recalled that the captain had spoken of him. He was Pauline's son by her first marriage. I cocked a haughty brow at his arrogance. "I thought Captain Garrick Savage was master of this house."

He answered sharply, "The captain seldom honors us with his presence here. While he is away, I am the master."

"I would have thought that Mister Welsey Savage would be master of the house in his father's absence," I said with a hint of sarcasm.

He leaned back his head and gave a snoring laugh. "That poor fool will never be master of anything!"

Then he bent close over me again, his irritating nearness bearing down on me. There was an unpleasant trace of brandy on his breath. "Now will you tell me who you are, my pretty? And what brings you here?"

I searched for a biting retort. Before I could frame a suitable reply, a woman's voice called from the doorway.

"Hugh!"

It was Henrietta. His wife. She stood rigidly glaring at us, her face icy.

He winced. Angry disappointment flashed in his eyes. Suppressing it, he shaped an expression of aplomb as he turned to greet her. "My dear! I see we have a guest. Have you met her yet?"

She nodded curtly. Seeming determined to keep from showing any emotion, she spoke with a grating tautness. "I heard you ride in. You cut your canter short."

"Yes," he said. "I saw the schooner offshore and hurried home. I was surprised to see it. I didn't think it would return so soon."

"I didn't think *you* would return so soon," she said. Despite her efforts, a bitter edge crept into her voice. "Were you expecting *something* on *The Queen?*"

He shook his head. "I only wondered why it was here. Is anything wrong."

I told him, "Captain Savage is quite ill."

"Oh? He is?" He lifted a brow in obvious interest, but he did not seem disturbed by the news. "I believe mother will want to see me. Will you excuse me, please, Miss—ah—I still do not know your name."

Henrietta looked askance at him, as if she did not believe him.

"Laura Wickham," I said.

"Your servant, Miss Wickham!" He smiled and gave me a bit of a bow. "Until we meet again!"

10

I was alone in the parlor for quite some time before Pauline Savage returned.

She came hurrying into the room. Apologetically, she said, "I'm terribly sorry to have left you unattended for so long, Miss Wickham! I'm afraid that my husband's illness completely distracted me from my duties as a hostess. I do hope you will forgive me! Believe me, my rudeness has not been intentional!"

"Please don't speak of it, Mrs. Savage. Don't even give it another thought," I replied. "I do not consider your actions to have been rude at all, but rather I see them as a sign of your devotion to your husband."

She smiled as if appreciative of my understanding. "Would you care for tea?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"Oh, no trouble! No trouble at all!" She clapped her hands. In a moment, a maid came gliding into the parlor. Pauline ordered tea brought to us, then seated herself across from me and began to ask polite questions about my trip to Savage Key.

She seemed so sincerely interested in me that she soon put me at ease.

When, in the course of our conversation, I again addressed her as Mrs. Savage, she said, "Please call me Pauline. I do hope you will think of me as a friend while you're here!"

I thanked her and told her, "You must call me Laura."

"Laura Wickham," she said. "A lovely name. I don't see how I could possibly forget it. Please believe me, my child, it embarrasses me terribly to admit this, but you seem so kind and understanding that I hope you will bear with me. The truth is that I cannot for the life of me recall the captain telling me of you before your arrival today."

It seemed to me that if Captain Savage was as fond of me as I believed, he would have at least mentioned me to his wife. Perhaps I had mistaken his affection, I thought with disappointment. Forcing a smile, I said, "It may be that he never did tell you of me. It's been years since I saw him last. I doubt that I occupied his thoughts often during those years."

"Ah, then he was a friend of your family when you were young?"

"He became one," I said and went on to tell her a little of how I had come to meet Captain Savage.

She chuckled at my story, but her eyes seemed shadowed, as if her thoughts were dark. She asked, "I don't suppose you are very well acquainted with his first mate, Mister Ainsley?"

"Hardly!"

She lifted a questioning brow at the acid sharpness of my reply.

"When I first met Bram Ainsley, I found him vile and obnoxious," I explained. Indignation crept into my voice as I thought of his behavior toward me on board *The Savage Queen*. "It appears that the years have changed him little! And *not* for the better!"

She nodded in agreement. "He's gutter trash, you know. I really cannot understand my husband bringing him into this house the way he does, as if the creature were our equal! But then Captain Savage rarely considers our sensibilities and needs here in this wilderness. I was quite surprised when he brought you to visit. He is seldom so thoughtful."

"He wanted me to meet Wes—" Remembering my oath, I caught my tongue and amended my error. "To meet his family."

"We are delighted to have you here!" She smiled sweetly at me. "You don't know how lonely I grow for the company of other women. I do hope you will enjoy your stay with us."

Just then the maid arrived with the tea. I took her to be one of the Spanish Indians from the village, a descendant of the early Spanish explorers and the natives they had found inhabiting Florida. She had dark, handsome features and carried herself with quiet dignity. Slipping unobtrusively into the room, she delivered the tray, then departed.

Pauline poured.

The tea service was exquisite Meissen porcelain. The silver was of an antique design, skillfully crafted and elegantly decorated. As I picked up my spoon, I thought of pirates' plunder. I was curious, but of course I couldn't simply ask Pauline if her husband's ancestors had been thieves. Wondering how I might obtain answers subtly, I said, "This does seem a terribly isolated place to live. I don't doubt it can be lonely here."

"You don't know how lonely!" She sighed. "My dear, you have no idea how I've begged the captain to establish a

residence for us in some more civilized location. But he insists we remain on this bleak little sandbar."

I commented sympathetically that it must be difficult to obtain the necessities of life in such a place.

She agreed.

Glancing around the room, I asked, "How on earth have you managed so well when a ship can't put in at your dock?"

"Heaven knows, it isn't easy! Everything has to be unloaded from vessels offshore into small boats and landed on the beach."

"You certainly have some unique pieces."

"Most of it was already here when I arrived. An inheritance from the captain's forebears." She sounded as if she cared little for the furnishings or for Captain Savage's ancestors.

Delicately, I commented, "They had unusual taste."

Almost as if she sensed the direction of my thoughts, she leaned toward me and whispered in confidence, "I am embarrassed to admit this, but there have been rumors that my husband's father and grandfather were of—ah—rather unsavory profession. I had no idea when I married the captain, of course, or I would certainly never have exposed my son to such a situation. Thank God, my husband's rarely spent much of his time here at the house. He's had small opportunity to exert his evil influence on dear Hugh!"

Astonished, I repeated the startling phrase after her. *"His evil influence!"*

"Oh, heavens! I don't mean to imply that Captain Savage is an evil man! Certainly not! But he surrounds himself with such odious companions! Heaven only knows what depravities that Ainsley person has descended to!"

Recalling Bram's arms about me and his lips on mine, and the response of my body, I felt my face redden.

"My poor dear," Pauline said. "You had to endure his presence aboard *The Savage Queen* during your entire trip here, didn't you? Such limited confines! I hope nothing untoward happened!"

"You don't know! You just don't know!"

"He *insulted* you?"

I blurted, "He tried to—to *assault* me!"

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed. For a moment, she sat silent, as if overwhelmed by the horror of what I had said. Then she glanced up at the ceiling as if she could look

through it into Captain Savage's bedroom. "Did you tell my husband?"

As I nodded, tears of self-pity welled in my eyes. "He didn't believe me!"

She rose and came to my side to put a comforting arm around my shoulders. "There, there, child! Don't you fret now. You'll be safe here. I'll see to that!"

I felt a surge of warmth at her solicitude. The fear and tension that had been building in me since Bram Ainsley appeared at my bedroom door in Cuba rushed from me in an uncontrollable flood of tears. I wept against Pauline's bosom.

When I finally caught my breath, she assured me that I need have no more worries. Bram Ainsley would be taking *The Savage Queen* out at the turn of the tide that night. Once he was gone, I would have no cause ever to set eyes on him again.

Incomprehensibly, this brought a fresh spate of tears to my eyes.

"You're exhausted from your journey," Pauline said. "What you need is rest. Suppose I have a bath drawn for you? A good, warm soaking and a nap will do wonders. You'll see!"

I confided in her that I had no luggage, no change of clothing, in fact nothing at all except what I wore. Although she was obviously puzzled about this strange state of affairs, she did not press me to explain. She simply suggested that I might be able to use some of Jennifer's things while I was at Savage House. Calling in a maid, she ordered a bath drawn and suitable clothing put out for me in a spare bedroom.

While we waited for the water to be heated and the tub filled, we took more tea and talked together. It seemed to me that Captain Savage had sorely misjudged his wife. I could not imagine this sympathetic woman as anything but a kind and considerate foster mother to his children.

By the time the maid returned to advise us that the tub was ready, twilight shadows were darkening the parlor. While I forced my feet into my still-soggy boots, the maid lit a small lamp for me.

Pauline advised me to enjoy my bath and rest, and not to worry about any social obligations. She suggested that if I were still tired later, I might take my supper in the bedroom rather than come down to the family table. She instructed the maid, Cora, to act as my personal servant while I was a guest in Savage House.

Thanking her sincerely for her consideration, I took my leave of her, then followed the maid upstairs.

Cora walked a step ahead of me, carrying the lamp, lighting my way through the dark hall. She said nothing as she led me to a front bedroom on the second floor.

It was a spacious room, furnished in the same manner as the parlor, with good but mismatched pieces. The commode, for example, was delicate in the Chippendale style, its mahogany surfaces highly polished, while the tester bed was a grimly massive Gothic Revival piece in ornately carved walnut. As in Cuba, the bed was draped with fine net mosquito bar. The bar was drawn back, revealing a frock, underthings, and a nightgown laid out on the bed for me. Everything I might need appeared to have been provided, even a pair of slippers.

The portable bathtub had been set up in the middle of the floor between the bed and the front window. It was a large one, painted on the outside with floral motifs and lined with copper inside. It had been filled to an extravagant depth with warm water. A luxurious Turkish towel and a fresh bar of glycerine soap waited beside it.

Setting the lamp on the bedside table, Cora offered to help me undress and bathe. In Cuba, I'd always had a maid to assist me with my clothing. Now, I discovered I had suddenly become very shy about baring my body in front of a strange woman. Despite Pauline's soothing influence, it seemed I was still somewhat nervous from my unexpected adventures. And perhaps still a bit disturbed by the new emotions that Bram Ainsley had caused me to discover within myself.

I decided that I could attend myself well enough. While I was aboard *The Savage Queen*, I had done so. I had even mastered the tricky little buttons down the back of my dress. I had Cora help me remove the soggy boots, then dismissed her.

When she was gone, I locked the door, stripped, and climbed into the tub. The water was just warm enough. It felt very good against my skin. I sunk into it with a deep sigh. Leaning back, I felt my weary body begin to relax.

Alone in the comfortable privacy of the locked room, I felt as if I had reached a safe haven at last.

Pauline had been right about the virtues of a warm tub. I grew pleasantly drowsy lolling in it. My mind drifted languidly back to my home in Cuba. I smiled to myself as I thought of Don Orlando. I did not doubt he would be very

worried about my disappearance. Like the hero of a romance, he would certainly start a search for me. At that very moment, he might be on horseback, hunting the hills for some trace of me. Or perhaps there had been rumors of a mysterious vessel seen lying at anchor off shore near *Roca Negra* the night I disappeared. Perhaps he had become suspicious of the schooner that sailed in the night, and had taken to sea in search of me. I could imagine him on shipboard, sleeplessly pacing the deck as he fretted about me.

When I noticed stars piercing the darkness beyond the bedroom window, it occurred to me that those same stars might be shining down on Don Orlando. He might be gazing at them as he wondered where to hunt for me. Thinking to share the moment with him by looking upon the same star at the same time that he did, as would happen in a novel, I tilted my face toward the window.

Eyes were peering in at me.

I screamed!

The glittering eyes disappeared instantly. I barely saw them. But I did not doubt that they were real.

The glimpse of them awoke all my lulled fears. My mind wrenched, losing grasp on rational thought. I kept screaming hysterically.

Boots pounded in the hallway. From beyond the locked door, I heard a man shouting, wanting to know what was wrong.

I couldn't answer. I couldn't think. All I could do was scream.

The doorknob rattled. There was a sudden shattering crash. The door was heavy and solid, but the lock was not. It gave at one fierce blow.

Bram Ainsley burst into the room.

I saw him towering over me, his face wild and his hands fisted.

A single thought filled my mind.

Rape!

Clutching my arms across my bare body, I screamed again and again in blind panic.

Vaguely I was aware of other people running into the room—of shouting—of violence—and then I was aware of nothing at all.

11

I awoke to the light of morning, not knowing where I was or how I had come to be there. The room, the bed I rested in, even the nightgown I wore, all seemed strange to me.

As I sat up, memories flooded back. I could recall in clear detail how I had left *Roca Negra*, the hacienda of my guardian in Cuba, and sailed to Savage Key. My memories of arriving on the key, of meeting Captain Savage's family and chatting with his wife, Pauline, were vivid. But of the evening, I had only a few fragmentary impressions. I thought I had bathed in a tub. Something frightening had happened—I did not know what. I could remember nothing more.

Suddenly I was thinking of Bram Ainsley.

I rose and padded to the window. It overlooked the Gulf of Mexico. The mid-morning sun was brilliant, the sky intensely blue above the glistening green-tinted waters of the Gulf. Sparkling little waves lapped up onto the shining beach sand. Laughing gulls wheeled over the water, giving their raucous cries that were so like mockery of human laughter. A line of pelicans skimmed low in the distance. Dolphins cavorted beyond the shoals. The skiff tied up at the dock bobbed gently at the ends of its mooring lines.

The Savage Queen was gone.

And with her, Bram Ainsley had sailed out of my life.

I had expected to feel deep relief once he was gone, but all I felt was a perplexing emptiness. I admonished myself for thinking about him at all. Trying to put him out of my mind, I looked over the clothing that had been provided for me from Jennifer Savage's wardrobe.

There was an appropriate array of underthings as well as outer clothing. The dress awaiting me was a simple cotton frock with self-ruffles accenting the slightly scooped neckline, and three-quarter sleeves. The fabric was a cheery print in shades of blue.

When I donned it, I observed that it flattered my complexion but did nothing at all for my figure To my dismay, I realized that even frail little Jennifer was more fully endowed with womanly attributes than I. The cloth sagged where it should have been filled by bosom and hips.

Some considerate person had put a comb and brush on the

dresser for me. I was certain Pauline must have done it. With such a kind friend as she, I might not find my stay on Savage Key unpleasant at all, I thought.

When I had finished brushing out my tangled hair and arranging it in a simple style suitable for the occasion, I looked about for my boots. I found them to have been dried, oiled, and freshly blacked while I slept. Again, I felt appreciation for Pauline's thoughtfulness.

Once I was decently dressed and shod, my natural happiness and confidence returned. I was looking forward to chatting with Pauline again as I headed downstairs.

The first floor hallway was very wide and ran the length of the house, from front to back. With the doors at either end open, there was a steady cooling breeze through it.

It was well furnished. Lowboys sat against the walls between the doors into adjoining rooms. On them were Parian figures and French art bronzes. There were several nicely upholstered chairs of various styles placed to catch the breeze.

As I descended the staircase, I saw Jennifer sitting stiffly on the edge of a chair. She rose at the sight of me and rushed toward me. Her face was puffy and flushed, as if swollen by tears. Her slender hands wrung at the kerchief she carried.

My heart leaped with fear that she had bad news concerning her father's condition. I hurried to meet her.

She confronted me at the foot of the stairs. Her voice was almost a sob. "*Why?* Why did you do it? How could you tell such terrible lies!"

"What?" I gasped, baffled.

"It's *her* doing, isn't it? *She* put you up to making those hideous accusations! She hates him! But she can't—she can't—!"

"I don't understand," I said, reaching out toward her.

She backed away as if she dreaded my touch, and screeched at me, "We love each other! We're going to be married! She'll never stop us! Never!"

"Please . . ." My hands fluttered helplessly. I was completely bewildered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She dabbed her kerchief at the tears rolling down her cheeks. Her eyes met mine with desperate defiance. "Bram and what you've done to him! That's what I'm talking about! What you've done to Bram!"

I felt as if I had been struck a physical blow. My head reeled at her words. She and Bram Ainsley were to be mar-

ried? And something had happened to Bram? Something for which she held me responsible?

I almost staggered at the turbulence of the emotions that swept through me.

A door opened and Wesley Savage stepped into the hall. He was without his coat, and his vest was unbuttoned. As he saw me, he began automatically to finger the buttons through their holes. He was wearing oiled cloth protectors over his sleeves. His sandy hair was tousled, as if he had been unconsciously running his fingers through it while he was deep in concentration.

Disheveled, with his eyes magnified a bit by the lenses of the spectacles he wore, he seemed even more boyish than he had at our first meeting. He could almost have been some young scholar interrupted at his studies.

"What's all the noise?" he asked as he came through the doorway. Seeing his sister in tears, he halted. A frown of concern wrinkled his brow. "Jen! What is it?"

She threw herself against his chest, pressing her face into his shoulder. He slipped a comforting arm around her and said softly, "This business with Bram?"

She nodded.

He looked at me. His expression was much like that of a small child deeply hurt by some adult act that he felt to be a grave injustice.

"Miss Wickham, I find your accusations against Bram Ainsley incredible and incomprehensible," he said. He had a hint of a stammer that suggested it took effort for him to speak out so boldly. He appeared reticent by nature, quite unaccustomed to asserting himself in such a manner.

"I made no accusations against Mister Ainsley!" I protested, my head still spinning.

He cleared his throat. "Do you deny telling Pauline that Bram attempted to assault you?"

I felt a rush of burning blood to my face. That was an extremely personal matter. Not something to be spoken of in public—especially not by a man who was hardly more than a stranger to me.

Trying to maintain my last vestiges of composure, I drew myself up indignantly and said, *"Sir!"*

Wesley was obviously distressed by what he had said and still intended to say, but he pressed on. "I know Bram Ainsley. I've known him for years. I am very familiar with the force of his ambition. He's entirely too strong, too self-con-

trolled to throw away his whole career in a moment of—of—lust!"

"She lied!" Jennifer sobbed to her brother. "She lied about him on board *The Savage Queen* and she lied again last night!"

Wesley demanded of me, "Do you deny it?"

"Last night?" I mumbled in total perplexity. A sense of violent events having occurred during the evening past hovered at the edge of my mind. I tried to recall what had happened.

Sudden comprehension swept over me like a sea swell as memories returned. As if he stood before me at that very moment, I saw Bram Ainsley towering over me, his face grim, his hands fisted, while I cringed with terror in the bathtub.

In my hysterical fear, I had thought that he meant to ravage me. Now I realized that he must have come charging into my room in response to my screams. He had come to defend me—not to assault me!

Jennifer's voice trembled. "Pauline's had him locked up! She means to send him to the authorities! To charge him before the law!"

Wesley bobbed his head in confirmation of his sister's words. His eyes held me responsible for a cruel wrong to Bram Ainsley.

My heart seemed to convulse. The confusion of my thoughts became chaos. Bram was still here in Savage House? He was held prisoner to be accused of a crime he had not committed? Because of me?

On shipboard, I had quailed when the captain offered to punish Bram with the whip. This was a far worse punishment that threatened him now. If he were judged guilty, he would be imprisoned, perhaps hanged. Even if he won his freedom, there would always be the scandal, the gossip, the blot on his reputation.

"No," I said thinly. "It's a mistake! I made no such accusation!"

"*Someone* did," Wesley said darkly. His tone implied that no one could possibly have done it other than I.

"Pauline says you accused him!" Jennifer wailed.

"I've got to explain to her! It's all a mistake! Where is she?" I said.

Hope glimmered behind Jennifer's tears. "I think she's in her rooms. I saw her go upstairs just a little while ago."

Wesley patted his sister's back sympathetically. His expression was doubtful, as if he did not think that I could con-

vince Pauline there had been a mistake and Bram should be released.

"I'll tell her the truth," I said in reply to his look of doubt. I was certain Pauline would be glad to learn that she was in error. She seemed such a kind, good woman that I could not imagine she might want to let Bram suffer a terrible injustice, no matter how low her personal regard for him was.

Gathering my skirts, I turned and hurried up the stairs.

Wesley and Jennifer trailed after me. On the second floor, they pointed out the door to Pauline's apartment.

I knocked, and Pauline called from within for me to enter.

She had a small suite with a private sitting room separating the bedroom from the hallway. The furnishings were quite different from those that I had seen in other parts of the house.

The decor was essentially Louis Quatorze. The loveseat, occasional chairs, and small tables were all of the same matching pattern. Fashionable lambrequins were draped over the tables. Porcelains and alabaster vases and several magnificent pieces of the most delicate crystal graced them. The centerpiece on the lowboy was a very impressive bouquet of rice-shell work, protected by a glass dust-dome. Several excellent oils ornamented the walls.

The room spoke of love of style and elegance. I did not doubt that Pauline had decorated it herself, making it her own personal refuge in Savage House.

When I entered, she was seated at a stitching frame by the window, busy with a large piece of crewelwork. The bright sunlight and the continual, cheery singing of wild birds spilled through the open window, giving the room a pleasant air. Pauline's expression was one of quiet contentment as she looked up.

At the sight of Wesley and Jennifer following me, she stiffened slightly. She gave them a nod. To me, she said, "You appear disturbed, my dear. Is something wrong?"

"I've just heard about Mister Ainsley being locked up," I told her.

She set down her yarn and needles, rose, and came toward me. "You mustn't worry about him any longer, child. Put him from your mind altogether. He will not bother you again."

"But he hasn't bothered me!"

"Laura, child, last night—"

I interrupted, "You were mistaken about last night!"

"Was I mistaken about hearing your terrified cries? Did my eyes deceive me when I beheld the door to your room smashed open, and that man inside the room, bending over you?"

"He wasn't—he didn't—there was a face at my window! That was what frightened me! Eyes were staring in at me!" The memories were vivid now. I could not keep my growing agitation from my voice.

"Eyes?" Wesley said.

I nodded. "It was horrible! I screamed! When I—he—he only came because he heard my screams! He was only trying to help me! He didn't want to hurt me!"

Pauline studied my face thoughtfully as she asked, "Are you certain of that, my dear?"

Jennifer cried, "Yes!"

"Shush!" Pauline said to her, as if the girl had intruded into something that was none of her business.

I echoed Jennifer's yes.

Pauline turned to me again. "How can you know what was in his mind?"

I was taken aback by the question. In truth, I had no way of actually knowing Bram Ainsley's thoughts. It was possible that I was completely wrong in my assessment of him. Yet I felt positive that when he burst into my bedroom, he had only intended to aid me.

Pauline glanced at Jennifer and Wesley. There was an oddly sharp edge to her voice as she continued, "He *did* assault you while you were aboard *The Savage Queen*, did he not, Laura, child? Or were you—ah—*misleading* me when you told me that?"

It seemed she was practically calling me a liar. I blurted, "No! He did! But he I mean—he tried to, but he didn't—I—oh, I don't know!"

"Now, now, my dear." She offered me an understanding smile. "You've been through a terrible experience. It's no wonder you're confused."

I was flustered, but I was certain about what had happened. Collecting myself, I insisted, "Whatever might have been in Mister Ainsley's mind last night, he did not *do* anything!"

"He struck Hugh!" she snapped, as if that in itself was sin enough to condemn Bram for all eternity.

Wesley cleared his throat and spoke up. "I believe that is beside the point."

Pauline's eyes darted to him. He took a step back from her scowl. His arm tightened protectively around his sister's shoulder.

Jennifer spoke in Bram's defense. "He wouldn't have struck Hugh if Hugh hadn't been hitting him!"

Pauline replied, "He would not have struck Hugh if he had not been guilty and resisting capture!"

Wesley shook his head in denial. "Bram wasn't resisting capture. He was simply defending himself. If Hugh hadn't attacked him from behind—"

"Hugh was trying to protect Miss Wickham!" Pauline interrupted.

"Even while the servants were holding Bram helpless?" Wesley said scornfully. "I was there, remember? I saw Hugh jump Bram from behind I heard you order the servants to grab Bram and hold him. I saw how Hugh kept hammering at him even after the servants had his arms pinioned! I saw Hugh keep ramming his fists into Bram's ribs again and again until Bram was senseless from the beating!"

I had no memory of such an occurrence. I had fainted before it happened. The images that flashed into my mind appalled me—Bram held and beaten, fists driven into his ribs, into the wound that would not yet be healed, the wound that I had made.

I shuddered with dismay.

Drawing a deep breath, I tried to compose myself I kept my voice as steady as I could "I—I really do not believe that Mister Ainsley had any intention of harming me last night."

Pauline studied my face intently, then sighed. "I suppose it is possible that you are correct in *this* instance. He might not have intended to harm you *last* night At least not before he beheld you in your—ah—unpresentable state—"

I blushed furiously as she reminded me that he had seen me totally nude in the tub.

She went on. "But certainly the previous incident warrants punishment."

Flustered, I said weakly, "Captain Savage did punish him."

She cocked a brow at me. "In what manner, may I ask?"

"He—he—" I felt foolish admitting that the captain had been so lenient with Bram, as if the offense against me had been quite trivial. With downcast eyes, I told her, "He threatened to put him to the mast if it ever happened again."

"You consider *that* a *punishment?*" Pauline sounded indignant at the way I had been belittled. "Laura, my dear, don't

you want revenge—er—justice for the outrage you have suffered?"

I was thoroughly confused. It did seem to me that Bram deserved some punishment. But I did not want him to be harmed.

I told myself that after all, I had not really been hurt, only frightened. Was it not enough that Bram be frightened in exchange? Surely he must be suffering great fear at the threat of losing his position, his freedom, perhaps even his life!

I said, "I think he's been punished enough now."

Pauline put her hand on my arm. "Dear child, you are a warm-hearted, forgiving girl. I know how deeply all this must distress you. But there are sordid realities one *must* face. Bram Ainsley is a dangerous man. It was fortunate that you suffered no worse than you did at his hands. He should be given over to the law before he attempts another such outrage—and is successful!"

"No!" Jennifer cried in anguish. She looked at her mother with pleading despair.

Seeing the two of them there, one might never have guessed that they were mother and daughter. There was nothing of loving tenderness evident between them. Rather, one might have thought them mortal enemies as they gazed at each other.

Pauline said sharply, "He's dangerous! He must be stopped!"

"I'll speak to father!" Jennifer replied. "*He* won't let this happen!"

Wesley protested, "Father's very ill! He mustn't be disturbed!"

His arm was still around his sister's shoulder. With a shake of her head, she twisted away from it and ran into the hall.

We all rushed after her.

Pauline shouted, "Stop! No, you shan't! Stop, do you hear! You'll not speak to him!"

Jennifer didn't stop. Clutching her skirts high, she scrambled up the stairs to the top floor. She had reached a door and was just throwing it open when we caught up with her.

Through the doorway, I looked into Captain Savage's bedroom. The drapes were drawn. Only a single lamp burning low at the bedside relieved the gloom. The shadow-filled chamber was scantily furnished; just a bed, a heavy old oak

commode, a dresser and wardrobe, and a pair of plain stiff-backed straight chairs.

The captain's sea chest had been put at the foot of the bed, and a few of his belongings were on the dresser. They failed to alter the musty, unoccupied quality of the room that no one had ever stayed in long enough to give it an aura of his own personality.

Captain Savage lay in the bed with a light coverlet drawn over him. His head, protected by a knit nightcap, was sunk into a thick pillow. He seemed smaller in the large bed than he had aboard *The Savage Queen*. And older, as if he had withered overnight in this barren room.

He had not been completely abandoned. A Spanish Indian manservant sat near the bed. The servant had been dozing. As Jennifer rushed into the room, he woke with a start and leaped to his feet.

The captain looked listlessly toward the doorway. When he saw it was his daughter who hurried to his bedside, his eyes brightened. He started to smile in welcome. But the smile flashed away as quickly as it had come.

"Child, child!" His voice sounded old and weak. "What is it?"

"Papa, it's Bram!" Dropping to her knees beside the bed, she grabbed his gnarled hand into her slender fingers and clutched it desperately.

"Bram?" he said in puzzlement. He glanced at the rest of us. "If that young scoundrel's done—" Stopping short, he looked toward the curious manservant. "Get out!"

The servant bobbed his head and scurried from the room.

Pauline stepped to the bedside. Sharply, she said to Jennifer, "Come now, girl! You mustn't disturb your father. He's in no condition to—"

"Belay, woman!" Captain Savage snapped at his wife. Then he spoke gently to Jennifer. "What is it, child? What's happened between you and Bram?"

"He didn't do anything wrong! He only meant to help! But she—she—" Jennifer gave a nod toward her mother. Her tone was acid as she spoke of the woman who had given her birth. "*She* wants to send him to prison or to the gallows!"

"What? The devil you say! Why?" The captain glared at his wife. His voice was no longer thin and weak. Once more he sounded like master of a quarterdeck.

"The man is insane! He's a danger to us all," Pauline began.

"Belay, I said!" Captain Savage shouted at her. He looked to Wesley. "You tell me about it, son."

Comforting his sister with a hand on her shoulder, Wesley cleared his throat and began to explain. Pauline tried one more time to interrupt. Captain Savage demanded her silence. Even in his illness, his will was more powerful than hers. Yielding to it, she drew back into the shadows to watch and wait.

As Wesley told him what had happened, the captain's face darkened with anger. Rage gave him strength. Suddenly he let out a roar. His voice blasted as if he bellowed orders against a rising gale.

"Dammit all, woman!" he thundered at Pauline. "I'll not have it! Do you hear me? Have him released at once! Release him and apologize to him, and let me hear of no more such idiotic impudence on your part! Do you understand me, woman?"

She started toward him, her hands held out as if she expected to take his into them. Her tone gentle, she said, "Please calm yourself. This has all been a terrible mistake. Your son exaggerates the situation. I can assure you—"

"Have you locked up Bram, or haven't you?" he interrupted.

"I can explain—"

"You can batten your damned hatch and jump to orders, woman! Or you can go to the mast by my hand!"

He was certainly incapable of actually carrying out his threat to thrash his wife himself. But his will and his tongue lashed at her with shocking force.

Her voice weakened as she tried again to protest. "If you'll just listen to me—"

"I've listened to you too often already, woman! You and that slick, sweet, lying tongue of yours! I listened to you a long time ago, and I've regretted it ever since. Now you'll jump to or—or—" Suddenly the angry words caught in his throat. He seemed to be choking on them. His body twisted in spasm. He gasped for breath as if wracked with unbearable pain.

I rushed to his side, begging to know how I might help. Wesley was asking the same question. Jennifer was crying too hard to speak. She pressed her face to her father's hand, her own small body convulsing in sympathy.

With smug triumph, Pauline said, "I told you so! I told

you he was too ill to be disturbed! See what you've done to him!"

"He needs a doctor!" Wesley said. "We'd best send to Punta Blanca."

"No," the captain managed to say between gasps for breath. "I'll be all right—a few minutes—son, go get Bram—bring him here to me."

"Yes, sir!" Wesley hurried from the room.

I felt a pang of dismay. I was very concerned for Captain Savage and loath to leave him in this moment of crisis, but my whole being was horrified at the thought of facing Bram Ainsley now, after what had happened.

I told myself I was guilty of nothing. I had done him no wrong. I had even argued in his defense, despite all the suffering he had caused me.

But I could not face him.

I fled to the refuge of my bedroom before Wesley could return with Bram.

12

In the privacy of my bedroom, I stood before a front window, gazing out at the Gulf. It rolled on in its eternal way, while the graceful gulls wheeled and dipped overhead. In the distance, dolphins sported among the waves. Pelicans dove and dined on its bounty.

Henrietta Marlin was on the beach. She sat quietly, watching a little girl about four years at play in the sand. I supposed the girl to be her child. The captain had told me of a granddaughter. Henrietta seemed rapt in the child's activity.

It was a scene of peace and beauty totally at odds with my own emotions.

Upstairs, Captain Savage, a man I held in fond regard, was seriously ill, perhaps dying. I longed to be at his side. But I simply could not bring myself to face Bram Ainsley.

I was not afraid of violence. Bram surely would not dare touch me now, after what had happened. Especially not in the presence of the family. I should have been able to stay by the captain's bedside and ignore Bram, as I had ignored him aboard *The Savage Queen*. I should have been able to put him from my mind altogether.

I could have compiled a lengthy list of reasons why I should not be at all concerned about Bram Ainsley's opinion of me. He was crude, insolent, and capable of brutality. He was a mere hireling I had encountered but briefly. He should soon be gone from my life as completely as a passing summer storm. Yet I cringed inwardly at the thought of the contempt I knew would be in his eyes, should we meet again.

My dreary brooding was interrupted by a knock at my door. Pauline called my name. Anxious for news of Captain Savage, I hurriedly opened the door to her.

She smiled sweetly as she told me, "I'm certain you'll be relieved to know that the seizure has passed. The captain is resting now."

"Oh, I am!"

"I've given him a sleeping draught. He should awaken refreshed in a few hours."

"I'm so glad! I was terribly afraid that he—he—"

She understood my meaning. A note of strain came into

her voice. "He won't succumb without a battle. He's quite strong, you know."

I nodded. His body might be wracked, but I had seen the tremendous strength of his will when he opposed his wife over Bram.

Collecting herself, Pauline smiled again. "Have you had breakfast yet, my dear?"

"No."

"I'll have something prepared for you. Will you come down, or shall I have it sent up?"

"I don't feel like eating right now." I was still disturbed by the captain's attack, and by my thoughts of Bram Ainsley.

"You must have something!" She sounded very solicitous of my well-being. Holding a hand out to me, she suggested, "Come dear, we can take a little tea together on the veranda. Would you like that?"

In response to the warmth in her voice, I returned her smile. "Yes, I think I would."

We went downstairs together.

There was a round wicker tea table flanked by armless chairs in a corner of the veranda overlooking the Gulf. It was shaded by the sloping roof and lightly touched by the sea breeze Pauline ordered our tea brought to us there. When we were seated, she began to chat amiably.

By the time the tea arrived, she had dispersed my dark thoughts and again put me at ease. Along with the tea, the maid brought us some little molasses cakes that were delicious. When I sampled one, I discovered that I did have an appetite after all. I devoured several of them.

Despite the isolation of her home, Pauline managed to stay well informed about the latest styles and activities in the outside world. She explained that the captain owned several schooners similar to *The Savage Queen* that traded profitably all along the coasts. Whenever any of them put in at Savage Key, it would bring a supply of newspapers and magazines such as *Harper's* and *Godey's*.

Her son Hugh made regular visits to cities on the mainland, from New Orleans to New York, and would shop for her, bringing her the most recent fabrics and notions and whatever else she might order.

Even so, she felt the loneliness of her life on Savage Key deeply Visitors were rare. And she was obviously a woman who enjoyed the pleasures of society.

She was wistfully reticent when she spoke of her first hus-

band, so I did not press her with my curiosity, but I did draw some conclusions from the comments she made. He had evidently been a gentleman of high social standing but limited funds. Their lives had been a whirl of activity, of galas and balls and travel. But when he died in the same smallpox epidemic that had scarred her, he left her without resources.

My heart went out to this poor woman, scarred and bereaved in the prime of her life, suddenly alone in the world with a small son to rear and no inheritance but debts. I could easily understand her acceptance of the proposal of marriage from a sea captain who offered her security, if not love.

I supposed that, at that time, bitter and despairing, she had thought Savage Key would be a place of refuge from the world, where she might hide her ravaged face. But with the passing years, she had come to feel this place more a prison than a haven. Now, although she did not say it in so many words, I was aware that she longed to escape it.

The privileged confidences she shared with me touched me deeply. I was inspired to trust her with some of my own private thoughts.

I told her much about my life, about the loss of my parents and brother, and about the home that I'd had in Cuba with Don Pedro and Doña Isabella. I found myself chattering on at great length about Don Orlando and my feelings for him. Seeming sincerely interested, she kept drawing me out until I completely forgot my oath to the captain and confided to her how Bram Ainsley had lured me from my quarters in the hacienda onto *The Savage Queen*, and how I had been kidnapped.

When she asked why on earth the captain would ever engineer such an outrage, I told her that he wanted me to marry Wesley.

"I don't understand," she said, giving a shake of her head as if she were totally bemused. "I simply do not understand. I wouldn't have believed him capable of such a cruel and inconsiderate scheme. Oh, I know he's ill tempered and stubborn, but he isn't an evil man. Not at all! No, I don't believe he could have concocted such an insane idea. Not if he were in full possession of his senses." She paused, eyeing me in speculation. "It may not have been *his* idea!"

"What?"

"Yes! It must have been some evil plot schemed up by that Ainsley person!"

"Why?" I said. "What earthly reason could Mister Ainsley have for wanting me to marry Wesley Savage?"

"You don't know Ainsley, my dear. Not the way I do. You are too sweet and innocent. The workings of that gutter mind of his are entirely too devious for an honest, straightforward, gentle person such as yourself to understand!" She took my hand in hers and leaned toward me, speaking softly, but with intensity. "Bram Ainsley is a dangerous man! He's ruthless and unscrupulous. He's the worst kind of low-born trash. But he has managed to ingratiate himself with Captain Savage and—and with my poor daughter, Jennifer!"

Her voice caught in her throat. She halted and took a deep breath. As she continued, a look of anguish twisted her face. "I know he has no feelings for the dear child! He has no love for anyone but himself! He wants to gain control over her father's fortune! He expects to do it by marrying her!"

I remembered how desperately poor Jennifer had wept as she pleaded with me to save Bram from the fate Pauline had intended for him. The thought that he was taking her tender love simply for his own personal gain appalled me.

Pauline's hand clutched mine as if in despair. "I've tried so hard to make Jennifer see him for what he really is, and understand how he is just trying to use her to achieve his own ends! I've begged the captain to forbid their marriage. But he *approves* of it! It's as if that Ainsley person has cast some kind of diabolical spell over them, blinding them both to his true nature! I don't know what to do!"

Now I could see reasons for her accusations against Bram the previous evening, and her eagerness to press charges against him in the courts. She meant to rescue her daughter from his machinations at any cost. And I, in my ignorance, had fought her, arguing for his release.

"I—I didn't know!" I stammered, feeling the sting of tears in my eyes.

"Of course you didn't, my dear," she said with grace. "But now—heaven knows what he has planned for you and Wesley!"

"I have absolutely no intention of marrying Wesley!" I declared. "I'm going home to Don Orlando as soon as I possibly can!"

"Yes, you must escape quickly!"

"Captain Savage told me that if I was not willing to marry Wesley after I'd met him, he would send me home on *The Savage Queen* when she returns."

"The captain is very ill, child. That Ainsley person will take command of *The Queen* when she returns here. Can you trust *him* to respect the captain's promise to you? Laura, my dear, if that creature intends to make use of you for some vile purpose of his own, no manner of oath will stop him. He is completely without honor. You know that, don't you?"

I nodded, fearful she was right.

"We must arrive at some plan of our own. We must find a safe way to return you to your home in Cuba and your dear Don Orlando, as soon as possible!"

"Yes!" I agreed eagerly.

"Trust me, my dear! Let me think about it for a while. I'll arrange everything!" She pressed my hand reassuringly, then excused herself and hurried into the house.

The tea was growing cold and I had lost interest in the molasses cakes. My thoughts were in Cuba, with Don Orlando. I ached to be with him, far from Savage Key and Bram Ainsley.

I sat gazing at the Gulf, fancying that Don Orlando was aboard a ship searching for me. I stared at the horizon as if I expected it to come into view any moment.

But the Gulf remained empty, and my thoughts were tiring me. I began to look about for some distraction.

Henrietta was still on the beach with her daughter. She sat on a cushion on the berm, where the sand was soft and dry. The child played near the tide line, using a pail and a shovel to build a lumpy structure of damp sand. She wore a charmingly grave expression of total absorption as she dumped sand from the pail into a heap and patted at it.

Captain Savage had mentioned his granddaughter to me several times during our conversations on shipboard. As I left the veranda to go to the beach, I tried to remember her name. Charlotte, I recalled.

It had seemed somewhat improper to me when I first learned that the captain's elder daughter had married the son of his wife. But, of course, there was no blood relationship. Captain Savage had not even legally adopted Pauline's child. He had only provided a home for Hugh.

It occurred to me that living on this isolated key, Henrietta had had small choice of suitors.

She didn't look up as I crossed the yard toward her, but little Charlotte fastened dark, solemn eyes on me. When I neared, she set down her pail and shovel and edged to her mother's side as if for protection.

Henrietta looked over her shoulder then. I smiled at her and said a good-morning.

She did not return my greeting. Her expression was wooden, her voice sullen. "Have you known my husband long, Miss Wickham?"

"What?" I was taken aback by the stark question. "No. I met Mister Marlin for the first time yesterday."

She scanned me critically. As if she disapproved of my appearance, she said, "You're rather pretty, you know."

Again, I was taken aback. I frowned at her in bewilderment.

She went on, "You must have had a lovely mother. I'm afraid mine must have been very plain. But my Charlotte takes after her father's side of the family. She'll be a beauty such as Pauline once was. She'll break thousands of hearts!"

She hugged the child to her and added defiantly, "But no one shall ever break hers! I'll see to that!"

Charlotte peered at me from her mother's embrace. Her chubby little face under its tousle of luxurious curls showed promise of great beauty. Her large, solemn eyes already had startling depth. Her pert little nose and delicate chin were perfectly shaped. Her cherubic lips pouted enchantingly. She poked a finger at her chin. Gazing at me, she said, "Go away!"

Startled, I took a step back. Although she was just a child, she was certainly old enough to have been taught the rudiments of good manners. I expected her mother to rebuke her.

But Henrietta spoke to me. "Yes, please do go away. You're disturbing us."

The strange things she had said to me, and this crude rebuff, confused me. I hardly knew how to react. Stiffly, I said, "Of course."

I hurried from their presence. Not wanting to return yet to the bleak old house, fearful of the possibility of encountering Bram Ainsley if I went inside again, I set out walking along the beach.

13

Between the sandy dunes of the berm and the lapping surf, the beach offered good footing. As I strode along, a pelican diving into the Gulf caught my attention. I watched him strike the surface, sending up a shower of spray that glittered like droplets of silver in the bright sunlight.

He bobbed to the surface again and floated along on the gentle waves, lifting his beak to swallow the fish he had caught, at the same time expelling the water he had taken into his pouch. Gulls swarmed above him, hopeful that he would spill some scraps of food they could claim. One, in its eagerness, actually lit atop the pelican's head. It tottered there, balancing with outstretched wings, as it anticipated some tidbits of fish. The pelican simply ignored it.

The scene was so comical that my spirits began to lift and I started taking interest in my surroundings. It is difficult to continue ignoring truly beautiful surroundings on a truly lovely day.

I became intrigued by the beach. Masses of seashells were scattered about it. Some were old, bleached white by the sun and water, tumbled smooth by the action of the waves. Others were fresh, brilliantly or subtly colored.

Fiddler crabs scurried among the shells. One of the thumb-sized creatures waved its huge courting claw at me as if in threat when I bent for a closer look. I pointed a teasing finger at it, and it scuttled into a hole.

I noticed a particularly interesting shell and picked it up. Its shape was rather twisted, tapering to a point at one end. At the other was a round opening and a sort of channel. The outside was shaded light brown, decorated with three lacy ribs like ruffles. The inside was pearly white. I thought it would look quite pretty on a knicknack shelf.

So would the long, thin, pointed shell nearby that suggested a unicorn's horn. It was a good five inches long with reddish brown spots on its creamy white surface. Carrying them both, I began to gather a few of the very small clamlike shells that lay hinged open. They were a multitude of attractive colors, like the wings of quaint little butterflies. Some were striped and some even suggested plaids. I could envision them useful for decorating all manner of handicrafts.

I became engrossed in gathering these treasures of the sea. My dress had no pockets and I hadn't a kerchief with me to carry them in, or even a bonnet I might use as a container, so I made a small pile of them well above the waterline, then began ranging for more.

I came across a striking triangular object that looked rather like an arrowhead. Its sides were a dark bluish gray, as smooth and shiny as enamel, and two of its edges were quite sharp. The third edge was composed of a lumpy substance with the texture of porous stone. It was almost large enough to cover the palm of my hand. Curious about it, I added it to my collection. Then I discovered that smaller objects of the same type abounded among the shells.

I found other interesting things on the beach. There was another dark enamel-like object that bore a remarkable resemblance to the tooth of a horse. And there was an old coin so worn from the rolling of the waves that I couldn't make out the emblems struck on it. I put them both on my treasure heap.

A man's voice anxiously calling my name startled me from my fascination with the beach. As I straightened from my gathering to look around, I suddenly felt dizzy. Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I shaded my eyes against the glare of the sun and looked for the caller.

It was Wesley Savage. He was coming toward me, but instead of walking down on the firm part of the beach, he kept to the high berm. The sand was very loose and deep. He struggled along the dunes, his boots sliding and sinking.

"Miss Wickham!" he shouted, waving a broad-brimmed straw hat at me. It was not his hat. That was on his head. The one he waved was meant for a woman. Bright blue ribbons fluttered from it.

Brushing the sand from my hands, I started up the beach to meet him. A very pretty shell caught my eye. I bent to pick it up. Again, I felt a rush of dizziness. The thought that I might be taking ill appalled me. I certainly did not want to be trapped in a sickbed on Savage Key.

"You shouldn't be out here in this sun without some form of protection for your head, Miss Wickham!" Wesley called. He did not come down onto the beach to me but halted on the dunes and held the hat out at arm's length toward me. "Here, I've brought you this."

"How thoughtful of you, Mister Savage," I said, puzzled by his behavior. A gentleman usually did not require a lady

to come to him but hurried to her side. I remembered how he had stood waiting while I helped Bram get Captain Savage out of the dinghy. That, too, had seemed peculiar behavior.

Fearful of fainting, I walked slowly toward him.

"I'm glad I saw you." He smiled rather shyly at me. "You know, too much of this sun can make a person very ill."

"Oh!" So that had been the cause of my dizziness. I realized that the sun was terribly intense. My hair was actually hot to the touch.

He continued, "You are looking a little flushed. Perhaps you should rest a while in the shade."

"I think perhaps I should," I agreed, setting the hat on my head. It was a bit too large for me. The ribbons needed to be tied under my chin to keep the breeze from lifting it off and carrying it away.

I couldn't manage them while I had the seashell in my hand. Thrusting it toward him, I asked, "Would you please hold this a moment for me?"

He examined it closely, while I adjusted the hat and knotted the ribbons into a bow.

"This is a very fine specimen, Miss Wickham," he said as he returned it to me. He seemed hopeful of a positive reply as he added, "Are you interested in seashells?"

"I'm afraid I haven't given them much attention until just now," I admitted. "Are you interested in them, Mister Savage?"

He nodded.

I asked, "Would you happen to know what kind this one is?"

"A lace murex."

He gave the impression of being quite knowledgeable about such things. I nodded toward the little pile of shells and curios I had collected on the beach. "I've gathered quite a few, and several other interesting items. Some strange objects such as I've never seen before. There is one that looks exactly like a horse's tooth, except that it's almost black. Perhaps you'd know what it is?"

"It's probably *is* a horse's tooth," he replied.

I cocked a questioning brow at him. He did not seem to be teasing me. I said, "A *sea* horse, Mister Savage?"

"A prehistoric horse. One that roamed the plains here thousands of years ago."

Recalling the lessons of my school days, I said, "I thought

that the Spanish explorers brought the first horses to the American continents."

"The first *modern* horses. Convincing evidence has come to light to suggest that there were native horses here in ancient times, but they became extinct long before Columbus ever set eyes on America." As he spoke, his enthusiasm for the subject overcame his shyness. He went on to tell me that according to the latest scientific theories, a large portion of the Florida coastal plateau that was now under water had once been dry land, and animals had ranged it that were no longer in existence. He said that pieces of their fossilized bones and teeth could frequently be found on the beach.

I did not fully understand all of what he was saying. His familiarity with the subject was impressive. I asked him, "Are you a scholar of antiquities, Mister Savage?"

"Hardly." He flashed his boyish grin at me. "I'm really only an amateur. I've always been fascinated by natural history and try to keep abreast of scholarship in the field. I receive all of the available publications and I pay the local Indians to bring me artifacts that they find. I have made something of a study of this key and its surroundings in particular. In fact, I actually have had the honor of having a few papers published in some of the minor journals."

Recognizing his modesty, I thought he was no doubt much more of a scholar than he admitted. "How thrilling! I'm certain you could identify some of the things I've found on the beach. I would appreciate it very much if you would. I'm quite curious about them."

"I'd be delighted to try."

"Come along! They're just over there!" I gestured for him to step down onto the firm sand of the beach and walk with me to my little treasure trove.

His face paled and his enthusiasm disappeared. He took a sharp step back, away from the edge of the berm. "I—uh—I do think you really should rest a while in the shade, Miss Wickham."

"I will in a moment. I want to get my treasures first. Won't you come with me?"

"Uh—please—later." He back-stepped again, seeming quite flustered and ill at ease.

His odd behavior puzzled me. Surely a few steps down the beach to the place where I had left my collection, and back again to the shade of the palmettos would not be dangerous. I had a hat now and would only be in the sun a few moments

more. And he was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat of the planter's style that would give him excellent protection from the blazing rays of the sun. But he seemed determined to hurry me into the shade.

It was of no importance whether I got my collection immediately or later. With a mental shrug, I let him lead me to a little knoll beyond the berm that was well shaded by cabbage palms.

As we reached it, he asked me, "Would you be so kind as to excuse my shirtsleeves, Miss Wickham?"

"Oh, of course."

He pulled off his coat, then spread it on the ground and motioned for me to seat myself upon it.

"Oh, no!" I protested. It was a good coat of fine white linen, undoubtedly expensive. "I couldn't! It might be ruined!"

"No matter."

I realized he was not simply making a gallant gesture. He was quite sincere. I smiled in appreciation as I thanked him and settled on the coat. He sat down next to me. The color had returned to his face. He seemed far less nervous than he had at the edge of the beach.

Despite his peculiarities, he really did seem to be an agreeable young man, I thought.

He looked at me with concern. "I hope I won't distress you by bringing up a painful subject, Miss Wickham, but I feel compelled to offer my deepest apologies for the disturbing incident last night. In a way, I feel myself to have been at fault."

"You!" I exclaimed. Surely that could not have been *his* face at my window, *his* eyes peering in at me while I bathed.

"I should have investigated the noises in the attic when I first heard them," he said. "I believe that the eyes you saw looking into your bedroom last night were those of a raccoon."

"A raccoon!"

He nodded. "I'm certain of it. Once we had father resting comfortably this morning, Bram and I went up to the attic to investigate. I've been suspicious that something was nesting there. I have heard noises above my bedroom at night several times, but I didn't give it much thought until this morning, when you told us that you had been frightened by a pair of mysterious eyes."

"There were raccoons in the attic?"

"Yes. They'd gotten in through one of the ventilation ports under the eaves and made themselves at home. They're remarkable climbers, you know. They have hands almost like ours and they're very intelligent. It couldn't have been difficult for them to reach the roof of the veranda and go up a gutter downspout. Bram and I cleaned out the den they'd made for themselves and closed up the opening in the ventilator, but please don't be surprised if you see them climbing around the house looking for another way in. They had a very cozy home up there, and I don't believe they'll be willing to give it up easily."

I was appalled at the thought of the contempt that Bram Ainsley must feel for me now, after discovering I had caused so much trouble over something as innocent as a raccoon. My emotions must have shown in my face. Wesley frowned and asked if something was wrong. I shook my head, wishing I could rid my mind of Bram Ainsley. But thoughts of him persisted in plaguing me. As Wesley and I chatted, I kept thinking of the warning Pauline had spoken about Bram's ambitions being a severe danger to Captain Savage's family.

When an opportunity occurred, I asked Wesley, "Do you know Mister Ainsley well?"

"Very well," he replied with a small, wistful smile.

"Do you approve of his betrothal to your sister?"

He lifted a brow at me. "Your tone suggests that you do not approve."

"I find Mister Ainsley arrogant and overbearing at the least," I said stiffly.

He looked at me with a strange sadness deep in his eyes. "Bram Ainsley is the man my father always wanted me to be. And that I never shall be."

His self-depreciation seemed totally unwarranted. I told him, "It appears to me that you are a far superior person to Mister Ainsley in every possible way, Mister Savage!"

He turned from me in obvious embarrassment. His emotion seemed something much deeper than mere modesty as he said, "You do not know me very well, Miss Wickham."

Before I could frame a reply, he hurriedly changed the subject by pointing out that the tide had turned and my collection of seashells might be washed away if I left it on the beach much longer.

"Then I'd best go get it now," I said, starting to rise. "Will you come along with me?"

He jumped up to offer me his hand in assistance as I rose,

but he did not meet my eyes. Again pale and flustered, he shyly asked me if I would please be so kind as to excuse him while he waited for me there on the knoll where we were.

I was completely bewildered by his odd behavior, and quite curious about it. I sensed that he did not wish to explain. To inquire would have been rude of me. Hopeful that in further conversation later he might give me some clue as to the cause of his sudden nervousness, I simply said, "Of course."

He appeared relieved and grateful that I asked no questions. Tugging a large kerchief from his pocket, he suggested I take it to carry the seashells in.

I accepted and went alone down the beach to get my collection. When I returned, I spread the kerchief open on the ground before him. I was especially interested in the large, dark object that resembled an arrowhead. Picking it out, I held it toward him. "Do you know what this is?"

"The tooth of a giant shark," he told me.

"Shark!" I looked out at the Gulf. It appeared so calm, so serene and gentle that I could hardly conceive of a shark large enough to have such awesome teeth lurking under its surface.

"An ancient species that's been extinct for ages," Wesley assured me. He pointed to the smaller specimens that I had gathered. "All of these darkened teeth are ancient fossils. Fresh shark's teeth would be as white as your own."

I ran my tongue over my teeth. "I haven't seen any white ones on the beach."

"One rarely does. There are sharks in the Gulf though. We see them occasionally. The fishermen from the village catch them and eat them." He picked up one of the other items from my collection. It was the shell that had put me in mind of a unicorn's horn. "This one is a *flame augur*. And those little ones there—"

"The butterflies?"

"Yes." He smiled. "They're coquina."

He went on identifying each of the different kinds of seashell that I had collected. When he came to the battered old coin lying among the shells, he said, "Now, this looks like a piece of real treasure. It appears to be a golden doubloon."

"Pirate's treasure!" I exclaimed playfully. As the words escaped me, I remembered the rumors that the first Captain Savage on this key had been a pirate. I caught a sharp breath, abashed at having brought up the subject of pirates before one of that captain's descendants.

My sudden breath and the flash of embarrassment in my face betrayed my thoughts to Wesley. Watching for my response from the corner of his eye, he admitted, "It is said that my great grandfather was a pirate."

I realized that he was not so concerned about the possible truth of the rumor as he was about my attitude toward it. He was worried that I might hold him in low regard because of his ancestor's sins. But I could hardly blame him for the actions of past generations. In fact, I found the idea of a pirate on one's family tree rather romantic.

To ease his mind, I laughed lightly. "Really, Mister Savage? With a gold ring in his ear and a cutlass in his teeth?"

He laughed with me then. His laugh was pleasant, rather charming. "It is possible, I suppose. I never met the old gentleman myself He had passed on before I was born."

Conversationally, I asked, "Were you born here on Savage Key?"

His reaction startled me. I had thought my question perfectly innocuous. But every trace of his laughter disappeared abruptly A deep intense sorrow came into his eyes. He glanced at the Gulf, then turned his head away quickly, as if recoiling from a sight of horror.

It seemed painfully difficult for him to reply to me. "No. I—I was born on board my father's ship, *The Savage Dream.* But I was very young when they brought me here."

My heart flooded with sympathy for whatever private sorrow caused him such pain. I felt an urge to comfort him, as one would console a hurt child. Boldly putting a hand on his arm, I said, "Shall we return to the house now, Mister Savage?"

He flinched at my touch. Steadying himself, he tried to answer my concern with a reassuring smile. It was a very small, weak smile, but a warm one. "You would do me great honor, Miss Wickham, if you would call me Wesley."

"Will you call me Laura?" I said.

"Thank you," he whispered, as if I had bestowed a precious gift upon him. Rising, he offered me his hand. "Yes, we can return now, if you wish."

I did not really want to go back into Savage House just then. The possibility of encountering Bram Ainsley depressed me.

Wesley sensed my reluctance. "Of course, if you would rather not return now, there is no reason that we must hurry back."

"I am enjoying it here."

"Would you care to walk a bit? See something of the key?"

"Oh, yes!"

He led me along a narrow path that wound through the lush little woods growing in the middle of the key. As we strolled together, he identified the different trees and bushes growing near the path. He pointed out the birds that filled the air with their songs from dawn to dusk. He could name each different bird by its call and tell me something of its habits. He showed me the signs of passing made by small animals that had traversed the same path we walked. And he picked me a nosegay of wildflowers with such names as *tickseed* and *rattlesnake weed* and *green eyes.*

The path took us across the key to the bay that separated it from the mainland. We did not go all the way to the edge of the water. Wesley halted me while we were still on the high ground, within the shade of the woods. From there, he pointed out various features of the scene before us.

The bay appeared a good quarter of a mile across; yet, he said, it was just a few feet deep at the most. It teemed with fish that leaped continually into the air. He told me that they were mullet, a species that would take no bait except dough balls, and rarely took them. Indian netted the mullet and smoked them to eat.

Across the bay, the mainland was almost all mangrove swamp, a mass of dark green vegetation broken by the mouths of a few small streams The mangrove was a curious tree that put out roots like branches from its trunk, sending them through the air down into the water and the earth beneath. Shell fish such as barnacles and oysters attached themselves to the roots. Hatchling fish hid among them. Rainwater and fresh springwater draining from inland down multitudes of little streams brought debris and silt that accumulated among the mangrove roots. Slowly this material would build up into solid land, and new mangroves would spring up in the new shallows. Because of this, the Indians called them "walking trees."

Wesley speculated that eventually the bay would be filled in by this natural process, and the key would become a part of the mainland. He thought that the shoreline of the bay had actually been much further inland only a few hundred years before.

"There are old Indian mounds back there behind the swamp," he told me. "You can't see them from here, but they

are clearly visible from the top floor of the house. They're rather large. I believe there must have been an Indian village on the site at some time in the past. I can't help but feel the mounds were on the edge of the bay when they were constructed."

"What are they like?" I asked. I knew that there were mounds and heaps of shell near Savannah that had been credited to the Indians, and I had heard a little about the mysterious mounds in Ohio that puzzled the scholars of antiquities.

"From the house, they simply look like flat-topped hills," he said. "There are some small trees and stands of scrub palmetto growing on them."

"Are there any remains of old buildings, or artifacts or things like that?"

"I don't know. I can't tell at the distance, even with a good spyglass." He sounded as if he were very curious about the possibility of ruins and relics himself.

I asked, "Haven't you ever explored them?"

"No!"

That strange melancholy swept over him again.

I was distressed at having again reminded him of whatever mysterious secret it was that troubled him so. I reached for his hand to comfort him. At my touch, his fingers clasped mine. They clung desperately. Then he gave a shake of his head, as if to rid himself of his disagreeable thoughts.

"I'm sorry, Miss Wickham," he said as he withdrew his hand from mine. "I'm afraid I'm rather poor company today."

"Not at all!" I replied. "I find you delightful company. And I thought that you were going to call me Laura."

"Laura." He spoke my name tenderly. For a moment, he looked at me with a longing that almost frightened me. Then, with a different kind of sadness, a dreamy wistfulness he muttered, "I suppose we had best go back to the house now."

14

Pauline was on the veranda when Wesley and I got back to Savage House. She was sitting in a rocker with a needlework basket at her side, and a piece of crochet in her lap. The hook darted in her nimble fingers, never hesitating as she watched us cross the yard and climb the steps.

There was a slight hint of stiff formality in her greeting to us that suggested she did not approve of our outing together. But she offered me a smile and invited me to sit with her awhile.

Excusing himself, Wesley went on into the house.

As I took the chair beside Pauline, I asked her if Bram Ainsley happened to be about.

She looked a bit askance at me. "He's sitting with Captain Savage."

"I hope he'll stay there!" I said with relief. "The less I see of him the better."

She gave a little nod of understanding. Then, with a biting edge of scorn in her voice, she asked me, "What do you think of our Wesley?"

Puzzled by her tone, I replied, "He seems quite pleasant."

"Quite pleasant!" She made the words sound like an insult. "Did he take you for a stroll along the beach?"

"Yes."

Her brows lifted in surprise. "*Not* near the water?"

"No," I admitted, wondering where her questions were leading. She appeared to have some definite point in mind.

"Of course not!" she said sharply. "He wouldn't go near the water under any circumstances! He's deathly afraid of the water. Did he tell you that?"

"No." I remembered how nervous he had become when I asked him to accompany me onto the beach. His face had gone pallid, and perspiration had beaded his brow. In retrospect, I recognized the symptoms of fear. It seemed an odd aversion for a grown man, especially one descended from sea captains, born on shipboard, and living on an island.

I asked her, "Why?"

"Weakness of character! Wesley is a very weak person. You can see that for yourself, can't you?"

I nodded, although he had not impressed me as weak, but rather as artless and boyish.

"He's terrified of the sea! He won't go onto the beach or near a boat," she continued. Her crochet hook jabbed away at the work in her hands as she spoke. "Do you know that he has never left this key since he first came here as a small boy? And he never will leave it! His cowardice has him trapped here!"

"Oh," I murmured, feeling both pity and contempt for such timidity.

"He's even frightened of thunderstorms," she told me. "He cringes like a scared rabbit whenever there's a severe one."

"That's terrible!"

She corrected me. "It's *shameful!* A fully grown man behaving like a mewling babe! I do not see how on earth anyone could possibly expect a girl of your obvious mettle to have any respect at all for such a weakling!"

I nodded slightly as I pondered Wesley's character. In his company, I had felt respect for him as a person, and compassion for the deep pain I had sensed within him. Now I wondered if that pain was the result of a serious flaw in his character, and more to be despised than pitied.

Pauline paused at her crochet with a stitch only half-formed on the needle. Her eyes searched my face as she said firmly, "It was quite foolish of Captain Savage to even contemplate the idea of your accepting a proposal of marriage from such a person as Wesley, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I agreed. No matter what Wesley's character might be, I would refuse to consider him as a possible husband. I had already given my heart to Don Orlando.

She completed the stitch on the hook, then set aside her work and put a hand on my arm. "My dear, you look rather fatigued."

"I am, a bit."

"Any exertion in this sun can be exhausting. The summers here are almost unbearable. You're fortunate to be leaving soon."

I nodded, my thoughts on Don Orlando.

"Are you hungry?" she asked "You know we don't follow the usual southern custom of having our main meal early in the afternoon here. We usually take cold lunch, each of us at his own fancy, and then dine together in the evening. If you'd care for something to eat, I'll have a maid bring it to you here."

Thanking her for her thoughtfulness, I replied that I was not hungry. She then suggested that I might enjoy relaxing in a bath for a while. Vivid memories of my terror the night before leaped to my mind. I pushed them aside. It was foolish to fear a recurrence of such events. And in truth, I was feeling rather sandy and damp from my walk. I thought that a bath could be quite refreshing.

Calling a maid, Pauline ordered the tub filled and fresh clothing put out for me. While the bath was prepared, we chatted together on the veranda.

When the maid, Cora, came to announce that the tub was ready and to escort me up to my room, she seemed strangely apprehensive. Once we were in the bedroom, she addressed me timidly. "Miss Wickham, I speak to you of the serious matter, yes?"

"Of course."

"The priest comes sometimes to our village. He is tell us it is important to be help others. He is tell us it is the terrible thing—the sin—to let a soul be doomed without even try to help."

"Yes," I agreed, perplexed by her words and her obvious distress.

She glanced about as if fearful of being overheard. In a whisper, she said, "The face you have see at the window, it is the face of a devil, yes?"

So that was the trouble, I thought. She believed some evil spirit had looked in on my bath. Hoping to put her fears to rest, I told her, "That was only a raccoon. Mister Savage says the attic was full of them. He cleaned them out and boarded up their entryway. You needn't worry about them, Cora."

"Is no raccoon!" She crossed herself as she spoke. "Is the ghost!"

My father had always scorned notions of the dead walking the earth. He had taught me that ghost stories were simply entertainments. I did not believe in them, but I loved them. If there was such a story connected with Savage House, I certainly wanted to hear it. I asked, "What ghost?"

"The spirit of the old Captain Savage. Do you not feel it here?"

"No," I said, although I had to admit to myself that the house did have a depressingly gloomy air about it. If ever a house actually were haunted, surely this would be the one.

"He is here!" she told me. "The first Captain Savage. The one who is give his name to this place."

"The one was was a pirate?"

She put her finger to her lips to silence me. "The Ma'am Savage does not like it to be said, this thing of the pirate."

"I shan't speak to her of it, I promise! My lips are sealed! Tell me about his ghost!"

"The old captain was very bad man. He stole things and sunk ships and killed people. Is be say he murdered a holy man. Is be say while the holy man die, he is put the curse on Captain Savage."

What a wonderful tale, I thought. Both a ghostly pirate and a curse. "Do you know what the curse was?"

"Very bad curse. Is damn the captain's soul, and all of his sons. All who bear the name Savage from him. As long as this house is stand, all who bear the name must live through hell on earth before the Blessed Savior is take mercy on them. And the old captain must remain here and see them all suffer for his sins until the house is no more."

"Wesley, too?" I said, thinking of the terrible private pain I had seen within him.

"All of them!" Her eyes darted with fear of the unseen. Urgently, she warned me, "Do not be marry with Mister Wesley! Please! Go away! Go home away from here sool, before the curse is touch you too, please! Yes?"

Her knowledge of the captain's plan to have me wed Wesley surprised me. Servants seemed to have remarkable ways of knowing a household's secrets, no matter how well they were guarded. I hoped Wesley would not learn of his father's plot. I thought it would embarrass him terribly. He seemed quite sensitive.

As to the curse, I considered that a mere superstition I thought it no more than coincidence that Wesley should suffer from a flaw of character that caused him torment. But I did appreciate Cora's concern for my well-being.

Sincerely, I said, "Thank you for telling me this, Cora. You needn't worry about me. I'll be leaving here as soon as I can. I have absolutely no intention of marrying Wesley Savage. I am betrothed to a fine young gentleman at home in Cuba. It is he I intend to marry, and no one else!"

She breathed a deep sigh of relief and crossed herself again. Then she asked, "You want me to be undress you for the bath?"

"No. You can go ahead and attend to your other work. I'll take care of myself."

"Gracias!" She made an awkward little curtsy and scurried

from the room as if she were certain the ghost was present in it.

I smiled to myself as I closed the door behind her. The story had been amusing. And effective. Despite my skepticism, I felt a little gooseflesh.

During my absence, the lock of my door had been repaired. I turned the key and tried the knob, making sure it was securely bolted before I undressed and stepped into the tub.

The tepid water soothed and relaxed me. I became so drowsy that I decided to nap awhile after my bath. When I woke, I was surprised to discover the sun was quite low in the west. It would soon be time for the family to gather for dinner.

Feeling rested and refreshed, I donned the attire that had been laid out for me. The dress was lovely one of pale blue watered silk. The tucked bodice was trimmed with tiny satin bows. Ribbons of the same satin knotted in larger bows caught up the ruffled overskirt into graceful flounces. A parure of delicate gold earrings and necklace set with tiny seed pearls had been provided for my use.

I arranged my hair to suit the costume, gathering it so that a mass of natural curls fell from the back of my head, and my face was framed by soft waves.

When I studied the effect in my mirror, the dress and hair looked fine, but my skin was ruddy from too much sun. I thought I had best inquire of Pauline whether she might have some lemon juice or tincture of benzoin or similar herbal that I could apply to my face before retiring to keep from developing an unfashionable tan.

As I cocked a saucy brow at my reflection, a sudden thought cast a shadow over my mood. I was not the only guest at Savage House. When I joined the family at the supper table, Bram Ainsley would undoubtedly be there too.

I sat awhile before the mirror, considering my situation. I could claim indisposition and excuse myself from dining with the family. But that would be an act of cowardice. At the table, with all the others present, Bram could hardly do worse than glare at me with those eloquent eyes of his. If it were a serious flaw of character for Wesley Savage to cringe at a stroke of lightning, surely it was just as bad for me to hide myself away from the mere glance of dark, stormy eyes.

Determined that I would face Bram Ainsley and show him

that I had no regard whatever for his opinion of me, I went downstairs.

To my great relief, I discovered that he would not be joining us at the dinner table but would take his meal at Captain Savage's bedside. Oddly, my relief was tinged with a feeling of disappointment. Throughout the supper, I suffered from a vague sense of distraction.

The food was excellent and the conversation was mannerly, although it had an awkwardness about it, as if no one at the table was truly in good humor. All seemed to struggle to maintain polite, pleasant facades for the duration of the meal.

When it was done, we females left the men to their own devices. Jennifer, obviously very ill at ease in my presence, excused herself, pleading a headache. In the withdrawing room, Henrietta took up a piece of Berlin work and settled in a corner. Pointedly ignoring me, she jabbed away at her stitchery.

Pauline and I chatted. I tried to bring Henrietta into the conversation by asking her about her daughter. The replies she gave me were so curt and sullen that I soon gave up.

Pauline sensed that Henrietta's attitude was making me very uncomfortable. She soon suggested that Henrietta should look in on Charlotte before retiring. Henrietta accepted the obvious dismissal without a word. Setting her needlework aside, as if relieved of an onerous duty, she left us.

Once Henrietta was gone, Pauline turned our conversation to my home in Havana. Soon I had forgotten my discomfort and was talking happily about my life there. Of course the subject of my betrothal came up. As I spoke of Don Orlando and my expectations for our future together, the longing to be near him again overwhelmed me.

Sympathetically, Pauline assured me she was making plans for my return to Cuba quite soon.

When we left the drawing room, the house was dark and quiet. It seemed that we were the last to retire for the night. Carrying a candle, Pauline saw me to my door and wished me pleasant repose.

With the bedroom door locked behind me, I started to let my hair down. I felt wistfully moody, and the room seemed stuffy. I decided to open a window.

The sea breeze that wafted in was fresh and cool, with a scent of blooming jasmine in it. The moon was large and bright, hanging over a path of silver that stretched from the

beach to the far horizon. Fond thoughts of Don Orlando and of the night of my betrothal ball filled my mind.

I felt much as I had that night, filled with sweet whispering yearnings. I wanted to be one with the night, a part of its mystery and magic. I did not feel at all like retiring.

Back in Cuba, it had been out of the question for me to walk alone in the moonlight. Here, there was no duenna to watch over me. No walls surrounded me. No gatekeeper stood ready to bar my way.

Here, for the moment, I had a marvelous freedom. The household slept. There was nothing to prevent me from walking in the moonlight on the beach.

Fluttering with the anticipation of adventure, I put out the light and slipped from my room.

To my surprise, the downstairs was no longer darkly silent. Now a glimmer of lamplight showed in the doorway of the parlor. I could hear a faint murmuring of voices. Wondering who held conference at this hour, I paused to listen. It seemed to be Pauline and Hugh, but they spoke in such hushed tones that I could not make out their words.

I suppressed my curiosity by telling myself that it would be inexcusable for me to commit such a base, rude act as eavesdropping on the private conversation of my hostess. If I were discovered, not only would I be in disgrace, but it would mean an end to my secret excursion into the night. Even if I simply walked past that open parlor door, I might be noticed and stopped. Turning, I groped through the shadows to the back door. I found the knob, eased the door open, and stepped outside.

There were a number of outbuildings behind the house, including the servants' quarters. To my relief, all were dark. I closed the door gently behind me and headed for the beach.

As I turned the corner of the house, the scene before me halted me. I gazed, awestruck by the beauty of the night.

A great gnarled old oak held the moon caught in its topmost branches. All around it, the sky was filled with masses of brilliantly glittering stars. The Milky Way stretched overhead like a streak of silver dust.

Framed by the lower limbs of the oak, the Gulf sparkled, as each dancing wave caught a shard of moonlight like a chip of crystal on its crest. The waves hurried ashore as if to deposit their shining cargo on the beach. Watching, I fancied the jewel-like seashells scattered over the sand to be bits of

moonlight coalesced into tangible form by the enchantment of the night.

A thick, twisted limb of the ancient oak drooped in a graceful curve, almost touching the ground before it arched upward to lift its cap of leaves and drape of Spanish moss to the stars. I drifted toward it. Putting a hand on it, I felt the rough texture of the bark. Awareness that the tree was a living thing like myself filled me with a sense of companionship toward it. The old oak and I shared this gloriously beautiful night together.

Deep in contemplation, I noticed no unnatural sound. I heard no approaching footsteps. But suddenly there was a presence at my back. A voice spoke over my shoulder. It was soft and warm and very tender.

"Jennifer!" Bram Ainsley whispered passionately into my ear.

The dress I wore belonged to Jennifer Savage. As I stood in the shadows with my back to him, he had mistaken me for her. Startled and frightened by his nearness, I wheeled toward him. Before I could speak, his arms were enclosing me. His mouth was taking mine.

For an instant, I was too shocked to know even fear.

I felt his wince of surprise and knew that he had realized it was not Jennifer he embraced. I expected immediate release from his arms. Surely after all that had happened the previous evening, he would not dare to insult me now.

But his arms tightened around me, drawing me even more closely against him, and his mouth became demanding on mine.

A wave of fear shuddered through me. I shoved my hands against his shoulders, trying to force him away. But strange stirrings were mingling with the fear in me. They surged through me, sapping my strength. My struggles against him slackened. My hands ceased their efforts to push him away. They rested on his broad shoulders, then slowly, as if of their own volition, crept around his neck until I was returning his embrace. My mouth accepted his.

Deep in my mind, a small voice cried out in horror at what was happening. My body refused to heed it.

All my fear was being seared away by the fires that raced through my blood. A wild starfire that burned without burning. The pounding of my heart drowned out the small, appalled voice in my mind. I was dazzled, overwhelmed by emotion more intense than I had ever felt before.

I knew without knowing, sensed without words, that I approached an infinitely sweet joy. I hungered eagerly for its completion.

Suddenly his mouth was tearing away from mine. His arms broke their embrace. I tried to cling to him, but he pulled free. As I reached out to draw him back, he caught me by the shoulders. His fingers biting into my flesh, he thrust me from him and held me at arm's length.

Sharp shadows cut across his face. White sparks of moonlight flashed in his dark, glaring eyes. His voice snapped like the crack of a whip.

"*Bitch!*"

The jolt of the word flung me from the brink of joy into total chaos. I was engulfed in a turmoil of shattered emotion.

I wanted him.

I hated him.

His passion had seemed as real, as intense, as my own. It had demanded, and I had yielded in his arms. I had actually wanted him to possess me. And I had thought him as eager in his desire as I.

Now he lashed out at me with contempt.

Could it all have been a cold-blooded charade? Had he simply used his hands upon my body in the manner of a musician drawing emotion from a mechanical instrument, without feeling emotion himself? Had he intentionally manipulated me to degrade me? Was I so weak of character that I could be exploited in such a way, by such a man?

I was filled with revulsion for myself. And with loathing for Bram Ainsley.

In a harsh half-whisper, I snarled, "You'll pay for this outrage!"

"I've already paid!" His voice grated through his throat in a taut growl. "Because of your damned vile lies, I've been held prisoner here while my ship sailed! My first command, and she sailed without me!"

Now my anger was burning as fiercely as my passion had burned just moments before. I realized that revenge was within my power. A scream would arouse the household. After my earlier accusation, and the incident the previous evening, no one would believe Bram Ainsley's protests, no matter what he might say. Even Captain Savage would have to accept his guilt and act accordingly.

The scream shaped itself in my mind. I did not voice it. Instead, I said, "If I scream, they'll *all* sail without you! If I

scream, you'll never have command of any vessel! You'll never be master of *The Savage Star!*"

He winced, and I knew my threat had struck him as if it had been a physical blow. Defensively, he said, "I saw the dress. I thought it was Jennifer."

I felt a vicious pleasure in the power I held over him. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to humiliate him as he had humiliated me.

I snapped, "But you realized it wasn't! And you didn't stop!"

"I *paid* for that kiss!" he said grimly.

He was still holding me by the shoulders, his fingers digging into my flesh. I jerked against his grip. "Let me go, or you'll keep on paying for it for the rest of your life!"

He hesitated. I could sense the struggle within him between reason and pride. Reason prevailed. He drew his hands away from me, letting them drop to his sides.

Suddenly I was cold, with a feeling that only his arms about me could ever warm me again.

But the embrace that had sent wild starfire racing through my blood had been intended for Jennifer. The name he had spoke with such tender affection had been hers. Not mine. To me, he spoke with anger and contempt in his voice.

My own voice was hollow and bitter as I asked him, "Do you love Jennifer Savage?"

"Yes."

Something deep within me refused to believe him. I thought of Pauline's statement that he only wanted to marry Jennifer in order to gain control over her father's fortune and business.

I said, "Do you love her as much as you love the Savage ships?"

He gazed at me, grasping the implications in my words. For a long moment, he was silent. Turning away from me, he looked out toward the rolling sea. Slowly, softly, he said, "I love her."

"As much as you love the ships?" I insisted.

"You wouldn't understand," he answered sharply. "You were born on silk sheets, not stable straw! You haven't ever been a gutter rat or a fo'c'sle hand! You wouldn't understand!"

I didn't try to understand. At that moment, only one thing seemed clear and important to me: Bram Ainsley had as good as admitted his desire to control the Savage fortune.

There was no question in my mind that he was ruthlessly selfish and mercilessly ambitious.

I did not doubt that all of the passion I had thought was in his kiss had been only lust. I was certain it did not matter at all to him whether the woman in his arms was Jennifer Savage or Laura Wickham or some other. I supposed any dockside whore might serve his needs just as well.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted desperately to scream and destroy him forever.

But I could not.

Silently cursing him—and myself—I raced back to the house. Tears streamed from my eyes as I rushed up to my room. I flung myself across the bed, pressing my face into the pillow to muffle my sobs.

But I could not muffle the emotions that wrenched at me.

I wanted him.

I hated him.

15

The soft knock at my bedroom door startled me. My heart pounded frantically at the thought that Bram Ainsley had followed me with the intention of apologizing—or of humiliating me further.

My tears stung like acid. Wiping at them, I called tremulously, "Who is it?"

"It's Pauline, my dear. May I come in?"

"Oh yes, do!" I felt the need of companionship, of a woman's comfort and understanding. I rose and started to unlock the door. But in my wild rush into the room, I had failed to lock it. Before I reached it, Pauline had entered.

She closed the door behind her. Standing with her back to it, she held up the candle she was carrying. "What on earth has happened, Laura, dear? You've been crying! Are you all right? I thought I heard someone running in the hallway."

The concern in her voice brought a new flood of tears to my eyes. "That was—I went out and I –I—"

She came to me. Setting the candle on the bedside table, she held out her hands solicitously. "Come, sit down, my dear. Tell me what's wrong."

I wanted to tell her everything that had happened. I felt a desperate need for the sympathy and consolation that I was certain she would give to me. But my tongue seemed to twist upon itself, unable to shape the words I meant to speak. I found it impossible to tell her about my unnerving encounter with Bram Ainsley.

Instead, I blurted, "I want to go home!"

"Is that what you've been crying about? You mustn't fret so, dear. You shall go home immediately. That's why I've come. To tell you that all of the arrangements have been made. You're to leave now."

"Now!" I squealed in surprise.

She nodded and whispered, "It must all be done in the utmost secrecy. The skiff is ready at the dock to take you to Punta Blanca. There, you'll be put safely on board a vessel bound directly to Havana. You'll be well away from here before anyone else can discover that you've gone."

"But—but—"

"What is it, my dear? You *do* want to go home, don't you?"

"Yes! Of course! Only I—I—" I couldn't explain. I didn't understand myself. I was eager to be back within the secure walls of my guardian's hacienda, happily planning my wedding to Don Orlando, just as I had been before this terrible adventure began. I wanted to put everything that had happened to me from the moment I first discovered Bram Ainsley on my balcony far behind me. I wanted to forget it—and him.

But this seemed too sudden a departure. Something within me was not ready to leave yet. Not so abruptly. Hunting a reason for my reluctance, I stammered, "I—I can't go until I've seen Captain Savage once more!"

"Impossible!"

"I have to speak to him! I have to explain to him," I said, telling myself it was my duty to the man who held me in such regard and affection that he had actually kidnapped me with the hope that I would marry his only son.

Sternly, Pauline warned me, "If the captain were to learn of your plan to leave without his permission, he'd interfere. He'd refuse to let you go."

"I won't leave without seeing him one last time," I insisted.

"You *have* to leave now! Can't you see that? If you don't get away from here immediately, he'll manage to work his will with you. He'll have you married to Wesley whether you want it or not! Don't you understand? He's a very strong man! Even as sick as he is, he's strong. If you don't leave quickly, he'll have his own way!"

I was fearful that she might be right. I knew that I should grab at the opportunity she offered and make my escape from Savage Key as quickly as possible. Yet, I could not bring myself to do so.

Aching with confusion, I moaned, "Not right now! I'll go tomorrow, but not tonight! I can't leave now! I just *can't!*"

"The arrangements have all been made. The skiff is waiting for you now," she said firmly, with a hint of growing exasperation in her voice.

I realized that she had every intention of seeing me leave immediately, no matter what my own wishes might be. That angered me. From the moment that Bram Ainsley appeared on the balcony of my bedroom at *Roca Negra*, I had been manipulated and used at the will of others. My spirit rebelled at being forced into yet another act that I had protested.

Even though I was certain it would be wise to yield to Pauline, I wanted to make my own decisions for myself.

Stubbornly, I said, "I will not leave yet!"

A scowl flashed across her face. Keeping her voice calm and level, she told me, "You're upset, my dear. You don't know your own mind."

I gave a small nod of agreement. My thoughts were in a thorough turmoil.

"Don't you understand that every moment you remain here, you're in serious danger?" she said ominously. "God only knows what that Ainsley creature may have planned for you!"

The direness of her tone sent a shudder down my spine. But I was determined to make my own decision. Emphatically, I said, "I will *not* leave now!"

She studied me a long, thoughtful moment, then sighed with resignation. Taking my hand in hers, she gave it a pat. "As you wish, my dear. I certainly wouldn't insist on your leaving now, if you really feel so strongly that you wish to stay the night. But I must make it clear to you that you are putting yourself into extreme danger by remaining here."

I nodded in acknowledgment of her warning, although I felt that she exaggerated the danger. Surely I would be quite safe within the locked room until morning. Then I would be in the presence of members of the family during the day. Once I had spoken to Captain Savage, I would accept her offer to be taken by skiff and put onto a vessel that would return me to Cuba. I could not see that Bram Ainsley would have any opportunity to do me any harm at all.

"Do you think you can sleep, Laura, dear?" she asked me. "You seem so terribly agitated. Perhaps a sleeping draught would help you to rest."

I thought that she was undoubtedly right. I surely would have difficulty in falling asleep while my mind was so astir. But I hesitated to take a sedative. I said, "I don't know. I've never used sleeping powders."

"But you have," she told me. "Last night after that incident with Ainsley, when you were so distressed that you were frantic, I gave you a sleeping draught in a cup of tea. It calmed you quickly and I believe you slept quite well. I do believe a draught would help you a great deal now."

I did not remember having taken a cup of tea the previous evening. I could recall nothing of what had happened after I fainted in the tub. But I knew I had slept well and awakened

refreshed, apparently none the worse for the intense emotional experience I had undergone. Supposing that the sedative must have been responsible, I agreed. "Perhaps a little sleeping powder would be a good idea. Just a bit, though."

"Of course, my dear. Of course." She smiled and patted my hand again, then left me to get the powder. When she returned, she already had it mixed into a cup of tea. I drank it down. Then she helped me out of my dress and into a nightgown. I could feel the powder taking effect as I climbed into bed.

As if I were a child, Pauline tucked me in and said sweetly, "Sleep well, Laura, dear."

I murmured a drowsy reply.

Taking the candle, she left me to sink quickly into deep, dreamless sleep.

Sounds stirred my awareness. With a sudden sense of alarm, I struggled to break free of the drugged sleep that held me. I thought I heard stealthy footsteps in my bedroom. Fear forced open my eyes, but I could see only faint blurs by the scant moonlight that spilled through the curtains. I could not arouse myself sufficiently from the sleeping draught to so much as lift my head.

A shadow seemed to be creeping toward me.

I thought it was Bram Ainsley coming to my bed to complete what had been begun under the old oak. My mind recoiled with horror, but my body flushed with warm anticipation.

Hands grabbed me.

One clamped down over my mouth, smothering any possibility of a scream. The other caught the arm I tried to lift in defense, pressing it down against the bed.

I became aware of a scent. Not the sea scent of salt and tar that clung to Bram, but a cloying odor of floral pomade and a sour smell of brandy-tainted breath.

Terror raged through me as I realized that the man who held me was not Bram Ainsley, but Hugh Marlin!

I thrashed, trying to escape his grip and the stupor of the sleeping draught. Too much sedative, I thought. Pauline had given me far too much of the powder. My limbs felt leaden. His hands subdued me with ease.

A cloth of some kind was jammed against my mouth and

tied tightly in place. Then another was whipped around my wrists and knotted.

I was gagged and bound! I was helpless!

He scooped me from the bed into his arms and stood holding me. His fingers explored my body. I shuddered, appalled at his touch—and at the thrill that raced through me.

My body was against his chest. I could feel the heat of his flesh through his clothing. I felt the flutter of his suppressed laughter.

He bent his face toward mine. The odor of his breath was nauseating. I tried to squirm away as his lips neared me. But the sleeping powder held me in its heavy grip I could hardly turn my head. I couldn't pull away from the hand that caressed my cheek.

My eyes blinked shut. His mouth brushed my cheek, then moved to one eyelid. His tongue traced lightly over it.

I trembled.

He touched his thick, full lips to my other eyelid, working the tip of his tongue against it in the same grossly sensual way, and again I felt the hateful humiliation of my own uncontrollable physical response. My soul writhed at the torment of it. My flesh desired the caress of a man's mouth and hands.

But not his!

Not *his!*

He was still laughing silently to himself, as if my plight gave him great pleasure, when he hefted me onto his shoulder. He held me there as if I were a sack of grain.

I tried to kick him, but I could barely move my drug-numbed legs. I tried to hammer my bound hands against his back. My awkward blows were feeble and useless. They seemed only to add to his amusement.

As he carried me from the bedroom into the hall, my mind was screaming with such despair that I could hardly believe no one within the house was aware of my distress. Although I could not cry out loud, I felt that surely such anguished thoughts as mine must be sensed somehow by someone.

But the house remained dark and quiet while Hugh groped his way down the stairs and carried me out into the yard.

Harsh moonlight slashed stark, black shadows from the night. From the woods came the strident screeching of insects, like the mocking shrills of myriad demons. A chill whisper of a breeze, like the touch of a ghostly hand, shivered across my cheek.

Helpless on Hugh Marlin's shoulder, I felt more alone than ever I had felt in all my life. Never had I known such total terror.

His boots thudded ominously on the planks as he carried me onto the dock. Beneath us, the lapping of small waves at the pilings sounded like evil giggles. Even the creaking of the mooring lines as the skiff rocked on the tide had tones of dire threat.

Hugh halted at the skiff. Roughly, as if I were nothing more than a sack of grain, he dumped me into it.

I fell on my back. The sleeping draught still held me. I lay motionless, staring up at him.

He was without hat or coat or vest, or even a collar to his shirt. The shirt was unbuttoned at the throat, and the tails hung loose about his hips. His trousers were tucked into seaboots. Looming against the starlit sky, he looked far more like some wild brigand than the dandy I had first met in the parlor of Savage House.

He stepped down into the skiff and cast off the lines. Seating himself, he fitted the oars to the locks and began to row. The skiff moved away from the dock, out into the empty vastness of the Gulf and the night.

He pulled strongly at the oars, with a slow, steady, controlled eagerness, as if he savored anticipation of a special pleasure while he propelled the boat toward its destination.

Time passed. I had no sense of its pace. I did not know how long we traveled or how far we had come when he shipped oars. I felt certain only that we were far from Savage House, far from any possible rescue.

The skiff rocked on gentle waves. The stars overhead seemed to bob with its motion. The night was very clear and very quiet. Far too beautiful for such horror as I felt.

I knew my situation was beyond hope. My heart pounded furiously, as if it tried to escape the cage of my ribs and flee. My fingers twisted about each other as I pulled futilely at the bonds that held my wrists. I was still very weak and drug-dazed. I could do nothing to help myself.

Hugh knelt at my side. Pulling the gag from my mouth, he said, "Scream now if you wish, my pretty!"

I made a small choking sound as I gasped breath, but I did not try to scream. I knew the uselessness of it. And I lacked the strength to voice my terror.

Faintly, I asked, "What do you want?"

"You!" he replied with a smirk. And he forced his mouth down onto mine.

I tried desperately to squirm away from the foul demands of his lips and tongue.

One of his hands grasped me by the hair, holding my face to his. The other clutched my breast and began to knead at it.

I felt an abominable surging within me. Frantically, I struggled to twist free of his grip.

His fingers dug sharply into my flesh and I winced at the pain.

He laughed.

It was a ghastly, bestial sound such as I thought a hyena must make.

His hand moved from my breast to the neck of my gown. With a jerk, he tore away the delicate fabric, baring my body.

His body came down, hot and heavy, atop mine.

With what small strength I had, I attempted to hold my legs pressed together.

His hand wrenched painfully at my hair.

As I writhed, his knee forced apart my thighs. Then his legs slipped between mine. And his hand went again to my breast, the fingers again rubbing and kneading.

The trembling of my body was stark agony. I spasmed with shock as he ripped into me.

My flesh could not escape him, but my spirit would not surrender to him. I clung to my determination that no matter what he took from me, he would be given nothing.

I fought against the heat of physical response that was rising in my body. The intensity of my loathing for him turned the fire in my veins to ice. I lay like a corpse under the pounding of his ardor.

His mouth worked rabidly to draw a reply from mine. I was aware of the increasing efforts of his body to compel a reaction from mine.

I managed to remain motionless and cold.

He lifted his head, growling, "Wake up, damn you!"

"No!" I groaned.

His mouth slammed down on mine again, ferocious in its demands. I refused to answer.

His hand caressed my breast. Massaged. Then, wrathfully, snatched and wrenched. I convulsed with the pain that racked through me.

He laughed.

Again and again, he drove at me, forcing me into spasms of pain.

I could not stand it. I could not escape it. I thought surely I must die. Or at least faint. But I did not.

It seemed hellish eternities passed before he was finally satisfied.

For a while that seemed yet another eternity, he rested atop me, lax and flaccid.

Exhausted by the pain, and still weakened by the sleeping draught, I could do nothing but bear the suffocating weight and pray for deliverance.

At last, he rose to his hands and knees, astraddle me. Hoarsely, he said, "You liked it, didn't you?"

I made no reply.

"Didn't you!" he demanded.

I moaned, "I want to die!"

With a mockery of tenderness, he said, "You shall, my pretty. But first you'll admit the pleasure I've given you."

"No!"

He lowered his face to press another kiss onto my lips. With a desperate effort, I found strength enough to lift my head. My mouth met his. My teeth sunk into his lip.

With a shriek, he jerked away.

I had managed to draw blood. I could see the dark ooze of it on his mouth.

He wiped at it with the back of a hand. Then, cursing viciously, he grabbed me up from the bottom of the skiff and flung me over the side.

PART TWO

16

I did not know who I was.

I did not know where I was or how I happened to be there.

For a very long time, I was far too ill to care. I burned with fever. Only slowly did my health and memory begin to return to me.

As I recovered in mind and body, I learned that I was in a convent at some distance from Havana. From the sisters who cared for me in my illness, I garnered fragments of information about how I had come to be there. With the slow return of my memory, I was able to piece together the events of my life.

Hugh Marlin had ravaged me and flung me into the sea to drown.

Cuban fishermen, putting ashore on a deserted Florida key to smoke their catch for the trip back to their home, had found my unconscious body washed up on the beach. I had been nude and horribly burned by the sun. They had cared for me and taken me to the priest of their village.

In my fevered ravings, I had mentioned names and places which gave the priest clues to my identity. He had contacted Don Pedro, and I was returned to the custody of my guardian.

Don Pedro sent me to the convent.

The standards of behavior and morality for ladies of high position in Cuba were extremely strict. In the eyes of society there, my mysterious disappearance from the hacienda of my guardian, my long absence without the watchful protection of a suitable chaperone, and my condition when I was found, had all disgraced me beyond redemption.

No matter what the cause of my appalling situation might have been, no matter what explanations I might have offered, no matter how innocent my own part in my downfall, I was nonetheless considered a ruined woman.

It would have been well within Don Pedro's rights to reject me completely. He could have confiscated the small fortune he held in trust for me and turned away from me as if I were literally dead. But he was not an unkind man. He had taken what seemed to him to be the most charitable alternative.

He had given me and my inheritance over to the church.

It was expected that I would spend the rest of my life cloistered away, repenting my disgrace, while the money that

my father had left to me was devoted to good works in my name, in behalf of my own salvation.

I was not concerned with the loss of my inheritance. Never having managed my own affairs or known financial need, I had not learned to give much thought to matters of money. It was my proposed future that gave me concern. The spark of independent spirit in me refused to accept a life locked away behind the walls of the convent as if I were some felon imprisoned for the willful commission of a crime.

Even before I was well enough to rise from my bed unassisted, I came to the decision that I would not yield to such a fate.

My heart assured me that true love could overcome any obstacle. I was once again in Cuba, once again near Don Orlando, my betrothed. I did not doubt that he still loved me as passionately as he ever had. No matter how much my reputation might have suffered, I was certain that if I could only contact him, he would welcome me joyfully and take me in marriage, just as had been planned before I so foolishly left *Roca Negra.*

Surely, together, Don Orlando and I could stand against all the scandalmongers. Surely, together, we would make ourselves a life of happiness.

But from the prison of the convent, there was no way for me to contact Don Orlando. So I began to plot my escape.

I was not the only unwilling inmate of the convent. It was a place for the confinement of cast-off wives, disobedient daughters and otherwise unwanted females. The high walls were meant to keep the occupants in, as well as the world out.

But high walls had not kept Bram Ainsley from entering *Roca Negra,* nor had they kept me from leaving there with him. They would not hold me in the convent.

As I slowly recovered from my illness, I stayed to my bed, feigning more weakness than I actually felt. I pretended feverish mutterings, even after my mind was clear again. I made a show of needing support to walk, even after I was well able to stand on my own feet. In the privacy of the night, I tested my true condition. During the day, when the sisters were up and about, I kept my demeanor meekly subdued.

During my airings in the yard, I studied the walls. I plotted a route across a roof, through the limbs of a huge tree that overhung one wall, and then to freedom. I located an access

to the roof. Finally one night, I crept from my bed and made my way along that route by moonlight.

The climb was difficult and frightening. I longed for such strong hands as Bram Ainsley's to help me. But I was alone, and so I had to make my own way. And I succeeded. At last outside the walls, I hurried into the woods. Hiding there, I assessed my situation.

I was penniless, dressed only in the heavy flannel gown that had been provided for me, and without friends or refuge between the convent and the hacienda of Don Orlando.

I knew the location of the convent, so I was able to judge the approximate direction in which I must travel to reach the hacienda. I set my course by the stars and the sun and the scent of the breezes blowing in from the sea. I kept to the woods as much as possible and did most of my traveling during the night. By day, I slept in whatever covert I could find.

As a fugitive, I discovered that I possessed a kind of instinctive animal cunning that I had never been aware of before. I ate berries and roots and stole food from empty peasant huts while the residents were about their daily business. I stole clothing from the laundry a woman left spread on the bushes to dry.

My progress was slow and difficult. I grew gaunt and ragged, and at times I seemed to slip from reality into waking dreams. Still, I kept going. And finally I reached familiar ground. Joy and relief flooded through me as I gazed across a broad valley at the hacienda of the family of Don Orlando.

There was no path across the valley. I had to force my way through thickets and scramble over outcrops of rock before I reached an open expanse of grazing land that was easily crossed. Beyond that, I had to make my way through woods.

It was twilight when I reached the pebble drive that led up to the gates of the hacienda. My heart pounded wildly within my breast as my bare bruised feet carried me along it. I was almost there! Almost in the presence of my dear Don Orlando once more!

The gates of the hacienda were high and heavy, made of oak, like the fortress gates of the castle in medieval romances. One gate had a sally port in it through which a man afoot could step without having to swing open the great gate itself. In that small door there was yet another smaller opening. It was a shuttered window just large enough for the guard to look through. He could open it and speak to anyone outside without the danger of *insurrectos* forcing in past him.

The gates, the sally port, even the little window, were closed when I stumbled to a halt. Eagerly, I tugged the bell cord that hung through a hole in the wall. I could hear the bell jangle on the other side. Then there were small scraping sounds that told me a bolt was being drawn.

The little window opened. The gatekeeper peered out at me. His eyes were deep set and disgruntled. He lifted one bushy brow querulously. "What is it?"

"I must see Don Orlando Garcia y Dobles!" I cried.

He squinted at me. "Who are you to demand to see the don?"

I drew myself up with dignity. "I am La Señorita Laura Wickham of *Roca Negra*, the hacienda of Don Pedro Hernandez y Corcel. I am the betrothed of Don Orlando. Call him! Tell him I am here!"

"What!" The word exploded from the gatekeeper in a scornful laugh. "Go away, foolish woman!"

"I *must* see Don Orlando!"

"Go away!" He slammed the shutter over the window.

I could have wept. I was there at last, with only the gate separating me from my dear Don Orlando. I was certain that on the other side of it, he longed for me as desperately as I was yearning to be with him. But this idiot of a gatekeeper refused to tell him of my presence!

I grabbed the bell cord, jerking it frantically as I screamed, "Let me in! Bring Don Orlando here to see me! Tell him I am here!"

The guard opened the shutter again and snapped at me, "Silence! Go away!"

I gave the bell cord another jerk. It jerked back. On the other side of the wall, the gatekeeper was pulling at it. He was far stronger than I. He gave a hard tug and the rope burned through my hands. With dismay, I saw the end whip up and disappear through the hole.

But I would not be deterred so easily. I would not be turned aside by a gatekeeper. I would see Don Orlando!

"Let me in!" I screeched, snatching up a rock from the drive. I began to hammer at the gate with it.

The noise I was making aroused the guard dogs that were kenneled inside, near the gate. They were fierce, nervous beasts kept especially to drive away beggars, thieves, and troublemakers. I could hear them growling and yapping as they fretted over the disturbance. Then I heard another scraping of metal on metal as another bolt was drawn.

From the nearness of the sound, I judged that it was the sally port bolt being pulled. Thinking triumphantly that the gatekeeper was finally acceding to my demands, I dropped the rock and brushed at my tattered skirts.

As I anticipated, the small door set into the gate swung open. But before I could step inside, the gatekeeper was filling the opening with his body, blocking my way.

He was a large man with a coarse, brutal look about him. His moustaches were full and drooping over thick, gross lips. The heavy brows above his piggish eyes were like wild, thorny vines.

He glared at me. "Stop this noise! Go away!"

"But I am La Señorita Laura Wickham! You must tell Don Orlando that I am here!"

"*You!* You are La Señorita! Look at you! You are bones and rags and filth! You are a madwoman! Do you think I will disturb the master for a madwoman's ravings? Go away or I will set the dogs on you!"

"I must see Don Orlando!"

He gave a shake of his head. Scooping up a handful of pebbles, he suddenly flung them at me.

I stumbled back in astonishment, trying to protect my face as the stones pelted me. But I did not retreat.

"You *must* tell Don Orlando that I am here!" I insisted. "When he sees me, he will know me!"

"I am going for the dogs," he grumbled, stepping back through the sally port. He slammed the door behind him.

"No! No!" I moaned. "I must see Don Orlando! *I must!*"

He had not been making a false threat. From the sounds that I could hear through the massive gates, I knew he was gathering together the vicious hounds to drive me away.

I acknowledged to myself that arguing with him was useless. He would never believe me.

Head hung, I turned and walked back the way I had come. My feet dragged and my whole being felt hollow. I was so close and yet I could not achieve the ultimate meeting with my dear Don Orlando.

Although the spark of spirit within me burned weakly, it refused to be quenched. I swore to myself that I would not give up. I would not!

That gate could not keep us apart forever. If I could not get in, then I must wait until Don Orlando came out.

I found a place around a bend of the drive from the gate, where I was out of sight of the keeper, yet could hear if the

gate was opened. There, I settled down to wait. Don Orlando would not leave the hacienda without my knowledge.

I slept erratically and had strange disturbing dreams. It was not the image of Don Orlando that came to me in them, as I would have expected. No. I dreamed of Bram Ainsley.

In the mysterious way possible in dreams, he seemed both the man who had aroused the passions of a woman within me, and at the same time he was the ragged galley rat I had taunted as a child. The mingled phantom appeared shadowed, his eyes hidden from me. He would approach, holding out his hands to me, and he would ask, *Don't you know me, Laura Wickham?*

At the question, I would sense myself on the verge of some great enlightenment. I would feel that if only I could look past the shadows into his eyes, I would understand. But, striving to see, I would awaken with a start. And then I would drowse into the same dream again.

Finally morning came. Forcing away the memory of my dreams, I readied myself to meet Don Orlando. I combed the tangles from my hair with my fingers and put my ragged clothing into order as best I could. I wished for water, to ease my thirst and to wash my face, but I did not dare leave the driveway to hunt it. Don Orlando might pass while I was gone.

I waited.

At last I heard the opening of the great gate beyond the bend of the road. I heard a jangling of bit chains and the clopping of horses' hoofs.

My heart was racing, and my being was aquiver with eager anticipation, as I stepped to the center of the drive.

They came around the bend at a slow trot. A manservant was riding ahead. Don Orlando followed. He wore his uniform of crimson and white and black. Its gilt shone in the bright morning sun. The horse he strode was a tall, black stallion. It pranced and champed at the bit that held its fierce spirit under control. It was a magnificent steed for a magnificent man. I thought I had ever seen anything so beautiful as the sight of Don Orlando that morning.

Yet, for an instant, I felt an incomprehensible urge to turn and flee into the woods before he could see me. It was an urge to escape, as if something quite terrible approached me.

The servant saw me waiting in the drive. Spurring his mount, he hurried toward me and gestured for me to get out of the way. I paid no attention to him but began to run to meet Don Orlando. The servant jerked rein, trying to swing

his horse around and block my way. The startled horse reared. I darted past its upraised hoofs.

Arms outheld, I cried, "Beloved! Beloved!"

"What is this?" Don Orlando muttered, halting the stallion with a sharp jab of the bit. He scowled at me. As I reached out to him, he nudged the horse back, away from me.

I knew how I must look. My body was wasted to little more than skin and bone. The clothing I had stolen was in tatters and I was filthy from my long journey. I had not doubted that no matter what my appearance, Don Orlando's heart would know me instantly. I was taken aback that he seemed not to recognize me.

"I am Laura! Your Laura!"

"*What!*" he gasped.

The servant must have been gossiping with the gatekeeper. He said, "It is the madwoman who was at the gate last night. Shall I drive her away?"

Don Orlando gestured him back and leaned from the saddle to look closely at me.

I brushed at a strand of hair that straggled over my face. "Surely you know me, my beloved! I am Laura! *Your* Laura!"

I saw recognition dawn in his face, and again I held my arms out to him. But there was no flash of joy in his eyes and he made no move to greet me. Instead, he drew back as if repelled. Anger edged his voice. "Woman, I do not know you!"

"But—but I am Laura!" I stammered. "Laura Wickham!"

His face had become hard and taut. "Whoever you are, it is of no consequence to me. I am Don Orlando Garcia y Dobles, a man of high position and the betrothed of a widow with estates and wealth. Do you understand?"

Betrothed of a widow? But I was no widow!

Understanding trickled through my veins like ice. It was not I of whom he spoke. In my absence, in the period while I lay ill and disgraced in the convent, he had turned his attentions to some other woman. A woman of financial substance—such as I had once been, but was no longer.

Staring at him, I realized that I did not know this man. I had never known him. I had once built a fanciful image of a man and imposed it upon the person who now faced me. But the Don Orlando I had loved so dearly had never existed!

Pride stiffened my spine and lifted my chin. I met his eyes haughtily.

"Yes!" I said. "I was mistaken!"

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I huddled in the woods and sobbed. I did not weep because I had been rejected. No, it was I who made the final rejection. When at last I realized what Don Orlando truly was—not the man of my dreams, but a prideful, greedy fortune hunter—I turned from him. And in leaving him, I felt something of relief, something of a sense of new freedom.

My tears were not for Don Orlando Garcia y Dobles. I wept for the loss of a dream, for the love that had never really existed, for the romantic fantasies that would never again sustain me as once they had. I wept for my lost illusions.

When there were no more tears left, I wiped my eyes and faced the future.

I was without funds or friends, without refuge or assistance. I would never again be accepted in the social world of Don Pedro and Doña Isabella. There was nothing for me in Cuba any longer, except a life of imprisonment within the convent.

The spirit in me would not accept that. I had to find a new life, somehow, somewhere.

I rose from my hiding place in the brush and began to walk. Using the sun and wind as guides, I headed for the sea.

As the hours passed, a strange calm settled over me. All emotion except the determination to survive seemed to have fled me. I became a creature of but one thought, one goal. I would return to my native land again. I would find my way back to the United States.

I forgot to hunt food. Despite my weariness, I did not stop to rest. I kept going until I collapsed from exhaustion, and sleep swallowed me. When I woke I moved on. Even moving, I continued to dream. As if fevered, I lost the ability to distinguish my dreams from reality. I knew nothing but my desire to reach and cross the sea.

Eventually I found myself upon an empty beach with the woods at my back and a vast, apparently endless expanse of water before me.

Although I had not eaten for some time, I felt no hunger. I did not notice the severe heat of the sun blazing down on my bare head as I walked along the beach. Instead of growing faint with weakness, I seemed to be filling with great power.

It tingled through my body and flowed from my fingertips. I felt enchanted, capable of achieving any goal, no matter what it might be. I moved with a sense of floating, as if my feet hardly touched the sand.

It was a form of madness brought on by the emotional shocks I had suffered, the lingering vestiges of my previous illness, the hunger my mind failed to recognize, and by the parching sun. It gave me the strength of madness.

With no plan, with no thought except my single goal, I walked along the water's edge. Seashells caught my eye. I began to collect them like poor mad Ophelia gathering herbs at the weeping brook.

Then I found the boat.

It was one of the little skiffs that the peasants used to fish beyond the surf. It had been drawn up across the beach and cached in the brush. I came across it by chance and considered it a gift of Providence. I did not doubt that I was meant to use it to reach the United States.

In my madness, I failed to consider the navigation necessary to the crossing, or the supplies that would be needed. It did not occur to me that such a small craft might not be able to weather the open seas. I was like an innocent child planning some great adventure without any comprehension of its true scope.

I tugged the little craft down the beach into the water. When it was afloat, I dragged myself into it and lay drifting in a haze, barely conscious.

I was only dimly aware of passing night and day, of sun and rain. Only vaguely did I see the bulk of a ship looming toward me. I did not understand what was happening when a boat was lowered and men came to carry my limp body back to the ship.

I was still suspended in that misty world of the mind where reality is but an obscure dream when the vessel docked and I was taken ashore. I did not know how long I had lain in a bunk aboard the ship, or how much longer I lay in a hospital bed before my senses began to return to me.

As I first began to recover an awareness of my surroundings, I found I was attended by nuns. I assumed I was imprisoned in the convent where Don Pedro had placed me, and I recalled my intention to escape.

I was still quite ill, certainly not in full possession of my wits, when I determined to try.

There were no high walls or guarded gates enclosing the

hospital. It was a simple matter for me to rise from my bed after the others in the ward were asleep, don the wrapper and slippers that had been provided for me, and slip from the room.

Again, an animal cunning filled me. I crept through the hallways, hiding whenever I heard approaching footsteps, until finally I located an unwatched door. Through it, I stepped out into the night.

The breeze was brisk and damp. There had been rain during the day. Puddles lay in the muddy street, reflecting the stars and moon that peeked through the remaining shreds of cloud. Around me all was silent and still. I saw no light but that of the sky, and the trembling flames of occasional street lamps. Nothing moved except the moths that fluttered about the lamps, and the breeze-stirred branches of the trees that lined the street.

I was alone.

Walking on and on, I began to feel as I had on the beach in Cuba, as if I were enchanted. I fancied myself wafted along on the winds, warm within, although my skin was chilled by the touch of the cool night air. Time had no meaning for me. My flight from the hospital faded into some distant, almost forgotten past. There was no future. My life consisted of drifting through an endless night.

I grew weary.

Around me, there were tall, blank-eyed houses set back from the street. The one nearest me had a flight of entrance steps fanning down from a small stoop. The iron railings flanking the steps curved to widen at the bottom. Their shape was like welcoming arms outheld toward me. I went to them. Seating myself on a step, I rested my head against the railing and drowsed.

I dreamed of being in a small boat, tossed on the sea under a lightless but scorching sun. When I was flung high atop the rolling waves, I felt exhilarated, but as with the swinging of a pendulum, my craft would plunge from the crests into deep troughs of depression.

I was sunk into just such a hollow when a man's voice drew me from my dream.

In the instant before the dream dissolved, I thought it was the voice of Bram Ainsley calling to me. I thought that surely his strong hands would catch me and lift me from my misery. My eyes opened, expecting to see the sharp angles and planes of his face before me. My arms rose to embrace him.

A hand caught mine. But the fingers I felt were not roughly calloused. They were as soft as a woman's. And the scent of the person who bent over me was not the pungent tang of the sea, but a sweet scent of bay rum.

I frowned, puzzled, as I realized that this man was a total stranger to me.

"Hello," he said, holding my hand in his. His voice was a rich, musical tenor, with a lilt to it. "Are you, perchance, waiting for me, my dear?"

I was too befuddled to withdraw my hand from his. I could not quite focus my eyes on the shadowed face before me. Thinly, I asked, "Who are you?"

He gave a little bark of a laugh. "You don't know me? You don't know Nicholas Farley?"

Weakly, I rolled my head from side to side.

He said, "Then what *are* you doing here dear girl?"

I didn't know. I could not remember. I heard myself mumble, "I've run away."

He jerked back, dropping my hand and glancing around warily. "From your husband? From your father?"

I felt as if I were still dreaming. My mind seemed filled with fog. I was unable to find my memories. I stammered, "No—no one—"

"One does not run away from *no one*," he said firmly. "Is it the police? Have you committed some crime?"

I did not think so. Again, I shook my head.

He peered closely at me. "You aren't really awake, are you? You really should be at home in bed. Have you been sleepwalking? Do you live near here?"

It seemed to me that I did not live anywhere. I sighed, "No home. No one."

"You're certain there's no husband or father hunting for you?"

From among the dark recesses of my mind came a definite feeling that I was completely alone in the world. I told him, "No one."

"Are you an orphan?"

I nodded.

"Ah! You've run away from your bed and board to seek your fortune, eh?" he suggested, sounding certain he had guessed correctly. "I know how that is. I ran away from an apprenticeship once myself."

The internal warmth I had felt seemed to have left me. I

shivered at the chill touch of the breeze and hugged my arms to my thinly clad breasts.

He went on, "All alone in the city, all cold and tired and probably hungry as well. We can rectify that, my girl. I've some bread and cheese and a little wine in my room. And a bed, my girl! A nice, warm bed!"

He scooped me into his arms.

The feel of his arms around me and his body against mine sent a chill through me colder than the breath of the night wind. Suddenly, my mind was no longer mercifully blurred with soft mists. I was starkly awake, every sense acute. I could hear the breaths he drew and feel the pounding of his heart in his chest and see the glitter of reflected moonlight in his eyes.

Memories returned to me in a rush. Too many memories. Horrible memories that shuddered violently through me. I fought to free myself from his repugnant embrace.

"Easy, my girl! You've nothing to fear from Nicholas Farley! I mean you no harm," he said, putting a hand to my cheek. He flinched with surprise. "The devil! You're not just sleepy! You're sick! Burning with fever!"

"Let me go! Let me go!" I whimpered, squirming against his grip. Although my senses had returned, my strength had not. My struggles were feeble.

He stood holding me and looking up at the building as if he considered some difficult decision.

"The devil," he said again, this time with a sigh. "Well, I suppose Hettie will know what to do with you."

Ignoring my efforts to escape him, he carried me into the building. Inside, he whispered, "Quiet now! We don't want to wake the landlady."

It was not his warning that ended my attempts to free myself. It was exhaustion. Unable to continue my meager struggles, I lay limp in his arms as he groped through a dark hallway and located a staircase.

One cautious step at a time, he carried me up two flights. At the top, he set me on my feet. I could not stand without support. He held me against his side with an arm around my waist as he hunted a sulphur match from within his clothing. When he struck it, the little flame leaped up to show me a narrow hall lined with closed doors. He dragged me toward one.

The match burnt out. He dropped it and knocked at the

door. There was no response. He knocked again. Still there was no reply. Mumbling to himself, he knocked a third time.

At last the sleep-heavy voice of a woman asked who was there and what was the matter.

"It's Nick," he called softly in reply. "I've got something here and I'm at a loss what to do with it. Come see, Hettie."

I could hear shuffling from behind the door. Then a man's voice. It was deep and gruffly pitched, but it had a good-natured ring to it. "What is it you've got there, my lad?"

"A girl."

The woman said wryly, "*You* are at a loss what to do with a girl, Nicholas?"

"With this one," he answered as the door swung open. "She's just a little slip of a thing, and she's burning with fever."

The woman stood before us in the doorway, holding a candle. Her face hovered above the light, looking as round as a full moon. It was seamed with the fine cobweb creases of many years. A halo of wispy white hair radiated from under the ruffled bedcap she wore.

Another face appeared. A man looked over her shoulder at us. He was quite tall, with a large head and a massive tousled mane of thick, white hair. Although he appeared to be as old as the woman, his face was hardly wrinkled. His smooth skin glistened as if it had been oiled.

I felt a surge of relief at the sight of these two people. I was no longer alone with the man who held me at his side. Surely he would not dare harm me while they looked on.

"Nicholas!" the tall man said. His deep voice had a little rumble to it, like distant thunder. Scowling with disapproval, he ran his fingers through his hair. "What do you think you're doing, bringing a—"

The woman interrupted him. Surveying me, she said, "The poor dear! She's hardly more than a wraith! You say she's feverish? Here!"

She thrust the candlestick into the hand of the man behind her, then held her arms out to me. Nicholas eased me into them. Pressing my face to her shoulder, I began to cry.

"There! There!" she said, patting my back. "It's all right, child! You tell Hettie all about it!"

Although I was alertly awake and my senses were acute to my surroundings, I hadn't the strength to order my thoughts or offer her a reply. All I could do was cling to her and sob.

As she helped me into the room, Nicholas followed us. "I

found her on the doorstep," he said, sounding amused and apologetic and distressed all at once. "I simply couldn't leave her there in her condition."

"Of course you couldn't!" Hettie agreed.

The tall man asked, "Who is she? What was she doing on the doorstep?"

Nicholas told him, "She says that she's an orphan who's run away from her keep."

"Were they cruel to you, child?" Hettie asked me. She tested my forehead with her palm. It felt very pleasantly cool against my fevered flesh. "Why, you are burning! Here, come lie down!"

Supporting me, she led me to a rumpled bed and settled me on it. She removed my slippers, then spread the covers over me.

Nicholas was watching with a very curious expression. Hettie cocked a brow at him. "Don't you go getting any notions, young man!"

"Never!" He gave an exaggerated shake of his head. Then he laughed lightly. "Look at her! She's just a brittle little scarecrow. What kind of notions do you think she'd give me?"

The tall man said jovially, "Nicholas, my lad, I have observed you panting like a hound after bitches so wretched that I wouldn't touch one with a stage brace!"

"How can you men talk so in front of this poor child?" Hettie snapped.

The tall man's mouth quirked in an apologetic smile. "Your pardon, my dear!"

Nicholas grinned.

"Here, Sam, bring the light a little closer," Hettie said to the tall man.

As he held the candle over me, she took one of my hands in hers. My fingers were gaunt, the knuckles like lumps of rock under the drawn skin. They had been badly chapped and cracked by the salt sea, and burned by the blazing sun, while I was adrift in a small boat. The now-healing skin was as rough and hard as if it had been calloused by heavy labor.

Inspecting my battered hands, she shook her head in dismay. "Why, whoever kept you must have made a slavy of you! No wonder you ran away!"

"Perhaps we should get her to a doctor," the tall man, Sam, suggested.

Hettie shook her head. "Doctors just want to be paid for

doing what any good herb woman can do better. And he'd probably want to return her to those beasts she's run away from. Or worse, put her in a *hospital!"*

"What's wrong with hospitals?" Nicholas asked.

"People *die* in them! Don't you know that?"

"People go to them to be cured," he said.

She shook her head again. "They go to them to die. Illness breeds illness. Hospitals are just gateways to the grave. I remember my mother . . ." Her voice trailed off sadly.

"Times have changed since your mother died, my dear," Sam said to her. "That Frenchman, Pasteur, discovered how diseases were caused by little living things that travel in dirt. That's why illness used to spread so terribly in hospitals when you and I were young. Now, it's different. Now they keep the hospitals clean and—"

"And people *die* in them!" she interrupted stubbornly "Sam, I will not have any part of sending any poor living creature into a pest hole to die! We'll take care of her ourselves! I'll nurse her back to health!"

Releasing my hand, she turned to face him squarely. She was much shorter than he, but as she stood defiantly before him, she seemed almost to tower over him. "Samuel Anthony Pincus! Have you no mercy in your soul at all? Would you turn this poor waif away from your door in her time of need? Is there no limit to your selfish lack of consideration for others!"

His eyes seemed to light with pride as she chastized him. With a broad smile, be said, "Bravo, my dear! An excellent performance!"

"Yes!" Nicholas agreed enthusiastically. "You were magnificent, Hettie!"

Her mouth puckered coyly. "I rather thought so myself. I haven't lost any of the old fire, have I?"

"My dear, you have even more fire, more warmth, more depth and passion now than you had on the day that I married you," Sam told her. Then he gestured at me. "But what of this child? What on earth are we going to do with her? We can't keep her ourselves!"

"Why not?"

He arched a brow at her. "We're leaving here the day after tomorrow. We certainly can't take her along with us on the tour."

"Why not?" she repeated.

"My dear, you know how hard our lives are, always on the

move, working continually, never staying in one place more than a few days at a time, never resting until the season is over. Why, one couldn't possibly take a sick child like this along under such conditions!"

"I was sick more than once as a child," she answered firmly. "And the troupe my family traveled with in those days had a far harder time of it than you and I have now. But I survived, none the worse for it all, didn't I?"

He drew a breath and sighed, then said, "Even if we could make room with the company for her, and take her along when we leave, what would we do with her until then? We can't hire another room for her without that old harridan of a landlady demanding some sort of explanation. If the child has run away, there will be someone hunting her. It would hardly be safe to let the landlady know she was with us."

"We'll keep her right here in this room," Hettie said.

"Where?" He glanced around significantly. "There's no spare bed, and hardly enough space to spread a pallet on the floor."

"She can sleep in this bed with me."

"In *our* bed?"

"You can go sleep with Nicholas."

"But my dear—" Sam began.

Nicholas spoke up in protest. "My bed's too small for two!"

Hettie looked askance at him. "It held two well enough last night. And the night before!"

Appearing abashed, he said, "How did you know that?"

"With all the noise you were making, and these walls as thin as paper, it's a wonder you didn't have the landlady up here pounding on your door, throwing us all out into the street! Heavens, Nicholas, you really should be more discreet! You know how difficult it is for theatrical people to find reasonable room and board in decent houses in the first place!"

He gave her a look of contrition edged with amusement.

She turned to Sam. "Dear, light the tea lamp and put the kettle on, will you? And fetch me a basin of fresh water."

"You get the water for her, will you, Nicholas?" Sam said as he struck a sulphur match. He put the flame to the wick of a small lamp on the bureau. There was a little copper kettle sitting next to it. He gave the kettle a shake to tell how much water was in it. Satisfied that there was enough, he set the kettle on the wire frame over the tea lamp.

While Sam was starting the water to boil for tea, Nicholas

got the basin from the commode, filled it from the pitcher, and handed it to Hettie. She asked him for a towel. When he gave it to her, she dampened it and wiped my face, then spread it on my forehead. The coolness of it was marvelous. Her tender smile was very comforting. The bed under me seemed a billow that I might float away on.

"You would like to stay with us, wouldn't you, child?" Hettie said to me. "And travel and see the world and perhaps even someday become a great actress?"

Smiling in reply, I closed my eyes and drifted into darkness.

18

The following day, Hettie fed me strange-tasting teas and thick, rich broth. Sam and Nicholas looked in on me, bringing several people who were introduced to me as the other members of the company. All seemed quite friendly and interested in me. I learned that they were actors and actresses, members of a troupe of players who traveled from town to town putting on their shows whenever and wherever they could.

Sam and Hettie, known professionally as Mr. and Mrs. Anthony, played the character parts. She, with her motherly face and warmth, generally portrayed kindly elderly women, although she claimed she enjoyed great success in the role of Hamlet's unhappy mother. He, with his grand bearing and magnificent head, was well suited to roles as men of substance, such as bankers, judges, and kings.

Nicholas Farley was the company juvenile, which meant he usually played the handsome young man who became romantically involved with the ingenue, or maiden threatened by the villain of the piece.

The ingenue was known on stage as Miss Violet Duval, and to her friends as Susie.

A middle-aged couple, Ralph and Minerva Quinn, completed the company as utilities, players who filled out the other roles.

These six people were the entire troupe. They not only performed, but did all the other work necessary to the production of their shows. They maintained the costumes and scenery, loaded and unloaded and drove the wagons, and handled a multitude of other chores.

Sam was nominally the director and manager of the company, as well as the male character. In truth, however, Hettie did the managing, keeping the books, controlling the funds, and mothering the entire family of players. When she told the others that she intended to keep me with the company, they accepted her decision.

There were two wagons. One carried the scenery. The other accommodated luggage. A pallet was laid for me atop the trunks and cases in the baggage wagon. Bundled in a blanket, I was taken from the boardinghouse when the land-

lady wasn't looking, and bedded down there. Hettie settled herself in the cramped space at my side, to look after me, and the wagons moved out, carrying me to a whole new life.

It was a pleasant and interesting life. We traveled at a leisurely pace. The towns where we stopped were usually those too small to have theaters of their own. We performed in hired halls, barns and even warehouses. Any building large enough to accommodate us and our audience was made to suffice.

In many ways, the members of the troupe were rather like children playing at being grown up. In conversation, they flitted from subject to subject. Often they became very concerned with trivial matters, while ignoring more serious problems. When the shows were successful, they were carelessly extravagant with their money. They would dine in good restaurants and stay in good hotels and buy fine tailor-made clothing for themselves. When funds were low, they stopped in shabby boardinghouses, sometimes fleeing the landlords by dark of night, leaving unpaid bills behind. On occasion, it was necessary to camp out and, as Nicholas gaily put it, "dine on stray chickens and turnips found wandering by the roadside."

As a child I had been taught that although plays such as the works of Shakespeare and Marlowe were literature of great artistic merit, actors and actresses were immoral and degraded, not fit associates for decent, respectable people. But I found no evil in these charming players. If they did use improper language at times, and make jests of matters others took seriously, and perhaps even commit acts that were improper, even illegal, by the standards of the society I had come from, they did it with such childlike innocence that I was unable to condemn them for their behavior.

They lived by their own rules in a world of their own, as fantastic in its way as the plays that they performed.

Entering their world, I decided to put my old life as far behind me as I could. I cast away my old name along with my past. It was common for theatrical people to take names not their own. Nicholas, for instance, admitted that the name he bore now was not the one he had been given as a baby, although he would never admit what that original name might have been. Hettie, who was properly Mrs. Pincus but who called herself Mrs. Anthony, helped me choose a new name for myself. With the troupe of players, I became Elaine Leslie.

As soon as I was well enough, I was put to helping with small tasks, such as mending costumes and assisting Hettie with the financial records, and "holding the book," which was a matter of following a playscript and prompting the performers when they were studying new lines. Hettie said that I showed sign of having talent, so when my strength was sufficiently recovered, it was proposed that I appear on stage with the others.

Since the company was so small, it was necessary for the performers to *double* in various roles. One actor would take several different parts, when the characters did not have to appear on the stage at the same time. This often called for very hurried changes of costume and makeup, and even some rewriting of the plays. All agreed that it would be very helpful to have another performing member of the troupe.

I started in "walk-ons," small parts without any lines, such as the role of a maid who had to carry on a tea tray, curtsy, and then leave the stage. Although I was quite nervous the first time I did this, I soon overcame that initial shyness and began to really enjoy stepping out in front of an audience. Pleased with my stage presence, Hettie began to coach me in small speaking parts.

As a schoolgirl, I had been adept at recitations. And so I found it easy to learn the brief speeches I was given. Soon I had mastered a number of the lesser roles. By the end of my first season with the company, I was appearing regularly in all of our productions.

It was the custom of the company to take a respite from travel between seasons and prepare new material. We ended our season in Louisiana, put our scenery in temporary storage, moved into a theatrical boardinghouse in New Orleans, and began planning the next season of travel.

Hettie suggested we prepare a new play entitlted *Orphan of the City or A Joyful Reunion.* This was a story about a poor little street waif in a large metropolis, who suffered many trials and tribulations before it was learned that he was the child of the long-lost daughter of a very wealthy family. I thought it sounded rather like Mr. Dickens' story of Oliver Twist.

The players were somewhat taken aback at Hettie's proposal. Ralph Quinn asked dourly, "You mean you want to add a *child* to the company?"

With a smug smile, Hettie shook her head and announced,

"We already have the perfect player to be little Willie among us now!"

She pointed at me.

"What!" I gasped.

The others murmured among themselves. It was Nicholas who first saw what Hettie had seen in me. With a sudden grin, he said, "Yes! Look at her! I do believe she could play a young lad!"

I blushed with embarrassment and shame. My figure had never been well developed. My long illness had left my poor body quite gaunt.

Minerva Quinn asked me to look directly at her. I obeyed. She put a hand under my chin, lifting it and studying my features. Nodding, she said, "Such a wistful pixie face!"

"And those eyes!" Hettie said. "Have you ever seen such soulful eyes!"

I blinked self-consciously.

"Perhaps," Ralph muttered with uncertainty. He scowled thoughtfully at me, as if mentally costuming me and adding stage makeup to my face. "Yes, perhaps she just might do it."

"You would like to, wouldn't you, child?" Hettie asked me.

"I—I don't know." I had played only small parts. The idea of doing a major role, actually the lead, both thrilled and frightened me.

Hettie addressed the others. "Listen to her! Hear that quaver in her voice! I tell you, there won't be a dry eye from New Orleans to New London!"

Pursing his lips, Sam nodded as if after serious consideration he had come to agree with his wife.

Hettie went on, "Sam and I will coach her. We'll have her ready for rehearsals by the end of the month!"

They discussed the play and decided it was worth trying. If the first rehearsals did not look promising, they could make a quick change in plans to substitute some other play.

So I studied my new part with Hettie and Sam, and they provided for me and cared for me as if we were all one family. I worked hard, learning the part of little Willie. When we began rehearsals for the new season, I knew my lines well. After our first walk-through, it was agreed that we would proceed with *Orphan of the City*.

The men of the company repainted and refurbished our scenery. We women prepared costumes. For the part of a young male street urchin, I was clothed in a pair of tattered trousers and an overlarge man's coat that hid my scant

bosom completely. My hair was braided, pinned atop my head, and covered by a large cap. My face was smudged with dark makeup to give the impression of smears of dirt. On the playbill, I was listed simply as *E. Leslie*, without any designation of my sex.

I had drilled in my role until I felt I could have recited the entire play from beginning to end, or even from end to beginning, if called upon to do so. I was quite confident in dress rehearsal.

We were to open the play in a hired hall in the town of Biloxi, Mississippi. That afternoon, we dined together, all laughing and excited about beginning the new season. It wasn't until afterward, as we strolled toward the hall, that I suddenly felt a queasiness in my stomach and such a weakness of my knees that I feared I would never be able to go on. I was filled with a terrible urge to run away and hide.

Reminding myself that the others were depending on me, that they had put their faith in me and I could not let them down, I silently swore that I would go through with the ordeal facing me. I tried hard to hide my nervousness. But Hettie noticed the shaking of my hands as she helped me into my costume and makeup. She assured me that even experienced players sometimes suffered just such nervousness before the opening of a new production, and that the moment the curtains parted, all my fears would vanish.

They did not.

When the curtains opened and I found myself standing alone on the stage facing the audience, I was nearly petrified. I barely managed to deliver my lines audibly and walk through my stage business in the first scene. I did no better in the second. My voice quavered. I failed to give my speeches with the strong emphasis that Sam had instructed me to use. I kept forgetting to make the appropriate gestures he had shown me while directing me in the role.

All through the first and second acts, the audience was discouragingly silent and I was on the verge of tears. I did not doubt that I had completely ruined the play. By the climax of the third act, when little Willie was to fall into the arms of his newly discovered wealthy grandmother and weep with joy, my sobs were quite real—although far from joyful.

To my astonishment, the audience that had remained so quiet throughout the play burst into hearty applause. The crowd was small, but the ovation they gave us was tremendous. Again and again, they called on us to take bows.

As we accepted their praise together on the stage, Hettie grasped my hand and whispered triumphantly, "Not a dry eye in the house!"

During the months that followed, *Orphan of the City* proved to be the most successful production that our troupe had ever presented.

As much as any of the others in the company, perhaps even more so, I lived only for the day and the show. My past life as Laura Wickham was behind me, the memories tucked away into the dark recesses of my mind. I managed to think none at all of the past, and very little of the future. Even the dreams that continued to haunt me while I slept were forgotten as soon as I awoke.

I had no desire for marriage and a home. Since my terrible adventures, my very being rebelled at the thought of intimate attentions from a man. I avoided men other than the members of our company.

With my fellow players, I was comfortable. Sam was like a father to me. Ralph and Nicholas treated me as if they were elder brothers, solicitous of my well-being, but otherwise having no interest in me.

I enjoyed life in the theater. Since our production was successful, we ate regularly and well. We took good rooms in decent hotels and boardinghouses. We provided each other with cheerful companionship.

The last vestiges of my illness faded away. The firm flesh of good health began to pad my bones. My breasts filled out and my hips assumed a gentle roundness. My hair regained its natural body and thickness, darkening to a deep mahogany highlighted with glints of gold Although my abused hands would never again be without blemish, oils and ointments made them softly smooth once more.

Under Hettie's coaching in proper carriage, I rid myself of the remnants of my adolescent awkwardness. I learned to move with grace and elegance.

These changes occurred so slowly that I did not fully perceive or understand them. Even when I beheld my reflection in a mirror, I still thought of myself as the "brittle little scarecrow" Nicholas had found on the doorstep.

I was completely taken aback when Nicholas ceased to treat me as if I were his little sister.

19

By chance, or perhaps some whim of fate, I was in the city of my birth when I discovered new truths about myself. Our company had obtained a week's engagement in Savannah, Georgia. Being once more among the old familiar landmarks of my childhood brought early memories up from the depths of my mind. It was only with some difficulty that I managed to suppress the more recent, terrible memories that had turned me away from my past identity as Laura Wickham.

Yet I enjoyed being in Savannah. My childhood there had been happy. I loved the look of the city with its many Trees of India and moss-hung oaks, its open squares and lovely gardens and stately homes.

It was early spring, but unseasonably warm. The air was balmy. The occasional showers did not dampen our spirits. Our production was entertaining excellent audiences. Our coffers overflowed. Joyful in the lovely weather, we decided to have a day's outing at the beach.

Hettie had been helping me make myself a new summer dress. I hurried to complete it in time. It was of Swiss muslin in a creamy ecru, with a delicately figured overskirt and a rather open heart-shaped neckline softened by a single row of lacy ruffles. Double rows of similar ruffles peeked from the flounced sleeves. I thought it would be perfect to wear for our picnic.

I put my hair in a simple coif, two soft, thick braids pinned in the manner of a bandeau, so that their fullness framed my face. By carefully avoiding too much sunlight, and using regular applications of the herbal ointments Hettie concocted for me and, I must admit, applying a light powdering of cornstarch, I managed to rid my face of all traces of undesirable tan and freckles.

Since my tiny bonnet of lace and pale mock roses offered no protection at all for my complexion, I carried a flounced parasol of the same lightly figured ecru as my dress.

In our casual finery, equipped with baskets of good things to eat, we were as gay as children on a holiday when we boarded the river steamer for our excursion to Tybee Island, some fifteen or more miles downriver from the city.

The boat trip itself was an important part of the outing.

We all lounged on deck, enjoying the scenery. The clay-red river wound through broad expanses of waving marsh grasses, past islands thick with pine and mossy oaks, past old Fort Jackson where Lafayette once visited, and past the ruins of Fort Pulaski, the million-dollar fortress that had fallen so easily to the rifled cannon of the Union in the War Between The States. We watched flocks of waterfowl startled into abrupt flight by our vessel's approach, gazed at long-legged white herons feeding in the marshes, and glimpsed alligators that looked like rough-barked logs as they lay sunning themselves along the riverbanks.

As the steamer moved slowly downriver, old memories drifted to the surface of my mind. An odd sense of being two entirely separate people came over me. To one, these sights were familiar. To the other, all was new and strange. The resultant feeling of quiet wistfulness that enveloped me drew me away from my cheerfully chattering companions to stand alone at the rail.

I was not the only one who stood silently apart from the others. Nicholas brooded alone near the bow of the vessel. He had invited a young lady of the city to be his companion on the picnic. He always seemed to make the acquaintance of young ladies quickly in the towns we played. But in this instance, he had been disappointed. When he went to call on this girl and escort her to the steamer, she had been indisposed. So he was alone, and rather morose about the fact.

Our leisurely cruise downriver ended at the sea. We were landed on Tybee Island near the Martello Tower, which some Savannahians claimed had been built by the Spanish more than a century before, but which the captain of the steamer assured us was constructed during the War of 1812. We carried our picnic baskets from the landing to the oceanfront. The beach was of firm gray sand. We spread our blankets well above the tide line and settled down to enjoy our lunch.

Hettie and Minerva heaped the plates with boned turkey, sliced ham, crab salad, and cold breads. I passed them out to the men.

As I offered one to Nicholas, he rested his hand on mine, looked into my eyes, and said huskily, "I never realized before just how lovely you've become, Elaine."

An icy shudder raced down my spine. The eyes that gazed into mine seemed to be Hugh Marlin's. Once again, I was Laura Wickham. My mind flooded with painful memories. I

wanted to flee from him. And I wanted to hurt him as he had hurt me.

I was again Laura Wickham, but at the same time I was Elaine Leslie. And he was not Hugh Marlin, but Nicholas Farley, who had discovered me alone and helpless in the night and had carried me safely into my new life.

For an instant I was held frozen by the chill I felt and by the conflict of my two beings. Then, sharply, my hand jerked away from his. I dropped the plate. The food spilled into the sand at my feet.

Automatically, Nicholas looked down. As his eyes broke contact with mine, I caught breath and collected myself. Calling on as much skill as an actress as I possessed, I shaped an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Nicholas. You startled me."

"Yes," he mumbled, evidently puzzled. Perhaps he had glimpsed the loathing in me. He looked into my face again. My smile must have been successful. He returned it. "It doesn't matter. I'm not hungry. Not for food."

I understood the implications in his tone. His hunger was for me. For my body. Again, I shuddered. Taking a quick step back, I said, "I'll get you another serving."

"Will you get your own, too? Will you come eat with me, Elaine?"

I did not reply but wheeled away from him to hurry back to Hettie and Minerva. Hettie had already prepared a plate to replace the one I had dropped. As she handed it to me, she asked, "What happened?"

I shrugged as if I did not know.

"Poor Nicholas," she said.

I looked askance at her.

"He's a very lonely boy."

That surprised me. I said, "But he has so many friends. So many women . . ."

"Starry-eyed little girls who fawn after the romantic characters he plays. Don't you know, my child, how lonely—how empty—a relationship can be when it's all built on fantasy? When the people involved are only seeking figures from their own imaginations, and not the reality of each other?"

Her words stabbed into my heart as they brought memories of my own mad fantasies about Don Orlando vividly into my mind.

She looked past me. Sensing the presence behind me, I turned to see Nicholas approaching. As he reached out to take the fresh plate of food from my hands, I searched his

face. There was lust in his eyes, but I was able to discern the emptiness, the loneliness behind it. Lust without love.

Was Don Orlando happy with his rich widow? I wondered.

Nicholas was my benefactor. I owed him a debt. I would not—*could not*—accept his amorous advances, but I vowed to myself that I would not rebuff him cruelly. No, I would be kind and sympathetic, if I could. I would play a role to him, just as if I were on stage. Taking my own plate, I accepted his request that I sit with him.

This play had no script. I had to make up my own lines in reply to his pretty speeches. When he offered me flatteries and innuendoes, I turned them aside. I tried to divert his thoughts by asking him about himself. The subject pleased him. He became engrossed in recounting his theatrical successes. I think he did not realize that he also told me a great deal about his romantic escapades.

I was astonished by his callousness. He seemed to look on human beings as if they were merely characters in a play, coming into existence when he met them, and ceasing to exist when he left them. He gave no thought to the effect he might have on the lives of others. He was unconcerned about the pain he caused when he enticed and misled some young girl in some town where the company played, and then abandoned her when the troupe moved on.

I realized I had been wrong in believing his naive immorality innocent of evil. Although he might not be sensitive to the wrongs he committed, the results were quite real. No matter that he intended no cruelty. He still caused cruel pain.

Even so, I was deeply indebted to him, and I continued in my struggle to be friendly toward him, at least for that day of the picnic.

The day was an ordeal for me. I was exhausted by the effort required to keep from turning on Nicholas and telling him my true perception of him. By the time we finally boarded the steamer for the return trip to Savannah, I was desperate for the curtain to fall on our impromptu play. I barely managed to stay in character, letting him linger beside me, and laughing at his little jests, while I avoided his advances.

That evening after the night's performance, when we returned to our hotel, Nicholas insisted on seeing me to the door of my room. He paused there, keeping me in conversation for several moments. When I started to go into the room, he tried to accompany me.

"Just for a moment!" he wheedled. "I just want to sit and talk with you for a moment more!"

"No!" I protested, near panic with the certainty that he had far more in mind. "I—I have a terrible headache! The sun at the beach today—the performance afterward—I'm so tired!"

"Poor Elaine! I know just the thing! A wonderful remedy for a headache, and very relaxing. It starts with a simple massage. Let me show you!" He reached for my shoulders.

Pulling away, I looked wildly about for help.

The other members of the company had already retired to their rooms. The doors were closed, the hallway empty.

Hettie and Sam occupied the room next to mine. I ducked away from Nicholas's hands and darted for their door.

He snatched at me.

I managed to elude him. Reaching the door, I knocked frantically.

I expected to feel his demanding hands grab me as I waited for an answer. My body was tensed, as it had been that horrible night when Hugh Marlin attacked me.

Nothing happened.

I glanced back.

Nicholas stood a pace away behind me, his shoulders slumped, and an expression of abject self-pity on his face. His eyes pleaded with me to take mercy upon him and offer him satisfaction of his desires.

I felt a sudden urge to laugh at him. An urge to laugh cruelly and viciously at his disappointment. It seemed no less than he deserved. After all of the young women he had lured into his arms, then cast thoughtlessly aside, he deserved to know the pain of rejection.

The door before me opened and Hettie looked out, an expression of question on her face. I asked her if she could give me something for a headache. She scanned my face, glanced at Nicholas, and understood. With a small nod, she called to Sam to slip on a robe. When he had done it, she led me into the room. Once she had closed the door on Nicholas, she said to me, "It's your own fault, you know."

"*My* fault?"

"The way you've been leading him on all day, you could hardly have expected less."

"*I led him on?*" I said, astonished at the accusation.

She frowned at me. "Didn't you realize what you were doing?"

I shook my head blankly.

"It's difficult to believe you weren't aware that you were flirting most disgracefully with the poor boy!"

"But I wasn't! I don't know how!"

"Don't you?" She cocked a brow at me.

Again I shook my head.

"Those eyes of yours! The little gestures of those dovelike hands, just so!" She moved her own hands in demonstration as she spoke. "And the way you'd glance at him from under lowered eyelids, then turn away a bit to show him that lovely profile of yours! The twists of your lips, the coy fluttering of your lashes!"

"Indeed, you were flirting quite skillfully, I must say," Sam added. "If I had received just one such glance as you were bestowing on poor Nicholas, I'm afraid Hettie would have had to rescue you from me by force." He wrapped an arm around his wife's waist and hugged her lovingly, making a jest of his words.

"I didn't know . . ." I mumbled in bewildered amazement. "I was only trying to seem friendly."

"Much too friendly," Hettie said. "Ah, child, you've had only small experience in the world, haven't you?"

I thought that she would have been shocked to know what experiences I had been through as Laura Wickham. But she was correct that I knew little of womanly wiles. A girl did not learn much about such things in a convent school.

"We shall have to discuss this matter at some length," she said as she stepped to the door. She peeked out, then nodded to indicate that Nicholas was gone. Gesturing for me to follow, she went on into the hallway. "But right now we're all very tired. Let's get you to your bed. Alone."

She lingered in my room with me while I prepared for bed, and she talked to me about flirting. She seemed to be an expert in the art. She spoke of the effects on a man, and of the responses a girl who flirted had to watch for if she didn't want to push a man too far. There were little warning signs, she said. She described looks of the eye, motions of the hand, even changes in the rhythm and intensity of his breathing.

When I was in my nightgown, she gave me a motherly hug, told me we'd talk further later, then left me.

Despite my weariness, I did not sleep immediately. There were too many thoughts rushing about in my head. I was surprised to realize that I had become an attractive young woman. I was intrigued by my newly discovered ability to en-

tice a man such as Nicholas. I pondered the way it had happened without my being aware of it.

For the first time, I realized the extent to which facial expressions and gestures of the hands and body made up a complete unspoken language. It was a language a person might speak and respond to without ever being aware of it. A language that might say far more than words. A quirk of the brow or a twist of the mouth could give one's verbal statements the lie. A small motion of the hand might betray an emotion one wished to hide. The tilt of the head, the set of the shoulders, each movement of the body could speak eloquently.

These were not the broad formalized gestures of the theater that Sam had taught me to use on stage, but subtle things of which one was usually hardly aware.

It occurred to me that, if in everyday life such unspoken language could convey messages so effectively, perhaps they could be put to good use on the stage to influence audiences.

For a while I considered the application of my new idea to my work. Then I began to wonder about using such unspoken language offstage to intentionally achieve the desired effect. Wouldn't the ability to manipulate a man's emotions give a woman power over him? If I could make men want me, make them expect to possess me, and then manage to elude them as I had done with Nicholas, I would have the ability to hurt them.

Men had used and abused me without mercy. It pleased me to contemplate exacting some measure of revenge.

20

I began to pay very close attention to the people around me. At the restaurants and boardinghouse dining tables, I carefully observed the expressions and gestures of my companions. In public places, I watched strangers. I tried to read their true emotions and guess their unheard conversations by studying their actions. In the privacy of my room, I spent much time before my mirror rehearsing what I had observed.

I felt few qualms about practicing my newly acquired wiles on Nicholas. Although I did not hate him, I despised his callous treatment of the young women he enticed. I considered him a fair subject for my experimentation.

At first I was quite cautious, withdrawing at the least glint of lust in his eyes. Slowly, I tried pressing my flirtations a little more, then more again. I employed the glances, the tricks of eye and lash and lip that Hettie said were so devastating, until I dared go no further. Then I would turn on him with an arched look, a scornfully lifted brow, the haughty tilt of a shoulder.

I learned to understand his own unspoken language. I came to recognize the signals that told me I had led him as far as I safely might, and still be able to chill his ardor with an icy cut.

Although he looked for solace from his many female acquaintances, he could not free himself from the power I had gained over him. As our tour progressed, he ceased to be lighthearted and childishly merry. He became petulant, given to long periods of sullen brooding. As his disposition changed, his ability to lure innocent young girls to his quarters waned. It pleased me to think that I was saving poor naive young creatures such as I had once been myself from his callous abuse.

I, too, changed. During my first season as an actress, I had been almost totally Elaine Leslie, with the memories of Laura Wickham curtained off in the blackest pits of my mind. I had managed to be almost as cheerfully childlike as the others. Even my troubled dreams never lingered after I woke.

But that day in Savannah, Laura Wickham had revived within me. Since then, I had continued to be both Laura and Elaine, yet neither. The harsh memories that belonged to

Laura gave a hardness to Elaine. I became shrewd and calculating and wary of the world around me. My studies of the silent language of the body sharpened my ability to read many unspoken thoughts in others, and my ability to convey subtle shadings to the words I spoke myself.

I could hide my own feelings, playing roles offstage as well as on. I learned to suppress any sign of the distaste I felt at the romantic attentions of men. I practiced flirting with the men that I met in the course of the company's travels. Teasing them, then leaving them with their desires unsatisfied gave me a bitter, sardonic pleasure.

Eventually we closed *Orphan of the City* and went into rehearsal of a new play. While we prepared it for tour, we quartered in New Orleans.

The city fascinated me. I loved the old buildings of the *Vieux Carré*, with their balconies of wrought iron, like lacework, and the roses that filled the air with their sweet perfume, and the secluded courtyard gardens that one might glimpse through open gates. The patois of the New Orleannaise intrigued me, as did the exotic excitement of the French Market.

The mighty Mississippi River held a particular allure for me. When it was at full flow, it was actually higher than parts of the city. Only the massive levees held it back from flooding many a shop and home. All along the levees, ships loaded and unloaded the wares of the world. Tall sailing ships and sleek steamers, little lighters, schooners, clippers and luggers, stern-wheelers and river rafts, bateaux and canoes crowded the water. On the wharves, one might observe black Africans and brown Polynesians with tattooed faces, red Indians wearing beads and feathers, and white trappers almost indistinguishable from the Indians. One might see and hear solemn-eyed Orientals with wonderfully musical voices, and occasionally even observe an Eskimo from the far north. Laborers and travelers, beggars in rags, and European nobility in the most stylish of fashions could all be seen along the New Orleans waterfront.

I went there often. At times, Hettie and Sam would accompany me. Other times, I went alone, disguising myself in boy's clothing, as I had during my performances as little Willie.

I should have known what might happen. Perhaps in some obscure way I did know but never admitted the possibility to

myself. Perhaps I even sought it. But when it did happen, I was completely taken aback.

I had just come up to the levee in my guise as a street urchin and was skirting a stack of baled cotton that awaited loading, when I heard the voice. It rang through the dockside babble and clatter as sharply as a crash of thunder through the patter of rain. As it struck my ear, I recoiled in a sudden turbulence of emotion.

My heart pounding violently, my whole being aquiver, I crept slowly forward to peer around the cotton bales.

Before me, I saw the steamer.

The Savage Star.

He was there at the rail, his cap cocked back on his sun-bleached hair, and the gold braid of a sea captain gleaming on his sleeve. He stood in profile to me as he shouted his orders at the crewmen on deck.

I stared at his rugged features framed against the bright, clear blue of the sky, and I knew that my body still longed for Bram Ainsley's strong arms. My mouth still hungered for his. I felt a chill emptiness within me and knew that only his embrace could ever give me a sense of complete warmth and contentment.

For a very long time I lingered there in the shadows, watching him. I did not turn away until he left the deck to disappear from my sight. Even then, I stayed a while waiting for him to reappear. When he did not, I finally broke free of the trance that had held me. Then, silently cursing my traitorous body, loathing its weakness of will, I slipped away from the waterfront.

Returning to my room, I wept.

After so much time, after all that had happened to me, how could I still feel such a desperate need for a man I despised?

That evening at rehearsal of the new play, I vented my angry frustration on Nicholas. This new production was a romance of young love. It had been chosen especially to display my feminine charms. I had the ingenue role and poor Nicholas was cast as the juvenile, the young man who was to become enamoured of me during the course of the play and to win my love in the final act.

As we went through our parts, I flirted subtly but mercilessly with him. When, in the closing scene, we embraced, I could feel the hot pulsing of his desire.

"Curtain!" Sam called, signifying that the play was over.

Nicholas did not release me from his arms.

"Let me go!" I demanded.

I doubt that he would have obeyed if the others had not been watching. I could feel his reluctance as he freed me from his arms. Softly so as not to be overheard, but with a grim intensity that he could not suppress, he said, "Elaine, why are you doing this to me!"

"Doing what?" I said with an air of blank innocence.

"Dammit, you know what you're doing!"

I gave him a look of icy haughtiness designed to pierce into his very being, and turned away from him.

That night at the boardinghouse, he came pounding on my door, shouting my name in a voice that was thick and slurred from strong drink. I did not reply, and after a while I heard the other men of the company drag him away.

In the morning, Hettie called on me. Her manner was quite cool as she told me that Nicholas had quit the company. She demanded to know why.

When I claimed to know nothing about his decision to leave, she said I had forced him to go. She said I had driven him away with my reprehensible behavior toward him.

I tried to explain to her that he had deserved the treatment I had given him. I pointed out how his cruel callousness toward the innocent young girls he had enticed had earned him punishment. I thought myself to be entirely in the right.

She disagreed. She protested that they were only town girls who would have given away their virtue to some man sooner or later. She insisted that Nicholas was one of *us*, and no matter what his crimes and sins might be, he should receive our protection.

As she spoke, I realized that Nicholas had charmed her just as he had the young girls. He had aroused the maternal instinct in her. She had never been blessed with children of her own, and now she had lost this surrogate son. She held me responsible.

Sadly, I assumed that my career with the company was over. I supposed that I could not expect to continue working with Hettie when she felt such bitterness toward me.

But by the following day, her anger toward me had vanished. She seemed to have forgotten Nicholas and her feelings for him completely. She was like a little girl who cried awhile for a broken doll, then went on to amuse herself with some other toy.

Once more, I realized just how unreal the world of the players was. To them, the moment came and was lived, and then was gone. For all of her awareness of human emotion and her sensitivity to it, Hettie had no true depth of emotion herself. I had a feeling that if Sam were to abandon her, she would weep and wail a brief while, then quickly forget him.

I envied her. The part of me that was Laura Wickham could not escape its memories. My dreams were haunted by the tall figure of Bram Ainsley.

The position of juvenile in our company was soon filled by a solemn young man who called himself Oliver Darnell. We finished preparations and took our new show on the road. Although our audiences were enthusiastic, they were not so large as they had been the previous season. Money was growing scarce, not only with us, but in general.

Then, in the fall of 1873, the banking houses of Messrs. Jay Cooke & Co. and Messrs. George Opdyke & Co. both failed. Smaller banking firms and large businesses tumbled after them. Economic panic spread until the entire nation was engulfed.

Wages and prices dropped. Manufactories closed. The unemployed wandered the roads, searching for better times. Farmers bartered the produce that they could not sell.

We performed for chickens and turnips, and camped in fields. When we could not trade entertainment for food, we exchanged chores for meals. I learned what it was to sleep cold and hungry. From Hettie, I learned to gather edible herbs in fields and woods, to make open fires, and cook over them. From my own need, I learned to creep silently into a farmyard by night, to find the nests of laying hens, and make away with eggs as slyly as a fox.

Many theatrical road companies gave up. We often found ourselves host to hungry players who begged to join our troupe for no compensation more than a share of our food.

But even when there is general panic in the nation, it seems there are still many people with affluence who continue to enjoy the luxuries of life unperturbed by the distress around them. In the cities, some established theaters failed, while others continued to operate successfully, performing to dress circles that glittered with diamonds.

The panic showed no sign of abating. We traveled on, our situation growing worse and worse. Ralph and Minerva Quinn decided to leave us. They had relatives with a farm

who would take them in. They said that there they would at least be able to eat regularly.

We replaced them with wanderers who begged for the work.

Unknown to the rest of us, Sam had begun to contact friends of his who held positions with established theaters around the country. Through one, he eventually managed to locate employment for himself and Hettie with a small Shakespearean company in Chicago.

With many a tear that I suspected would dry quickly, they announced the disbandment of our troupe.

The sale of our horses, wagons and equipment brought in a little money that was dutifully divided among us. I knew my meager share would not support me for long. I would have to find employment somewhere.

The company had been my family, the theater my life, since my rebirth as Elaine Leslie. Now, alone, I had to find a new life.

Opportunities for employment were so scarce as to be almost nonexistent, especially for a woman with such limited experience and background as I. I thought it possible I might locate a position tutoring or as a governess, since I was well educated, but I felt oddly averse to such work. I wanted to remain in the unreal world of the theater.

If I were to find work in a theater, I would have to go somewhere where there was an operating theater. I knew that one existed in Savannah.

It seemed somehow appropriate that I should return once again to the city of my birth and my enlightenment to seek the beginning of yet another new life for myself.

21

Savannah, Georgia was a city of shipping. It was dependent almost entirely on the cotton trade for its existence. It had suffered little actual damage during the War Between The States. As trade recovered from the war, so did the city. As a major port and rail center, it once again prospered.

With Britain as a major market for cotton, the city had a great deal of contact with its Mother England and continued to retain a strong flavor of English culture. Its merchants emulated the antebellum aristocracy. Even the carpetbaggers, who had invaded the south after the war, tended to fall under the spell of the city's grace and charm, and adapt themselves to its way of life.

The first theatrical performances in Savannah had been given in the old Filature building in the late eighteenth century. Savannahians had enjoyed such entertainments. In 1818, a fine theater designed by the noted architect, Mr. William Jay, had been opened. It was still in operation. Soon after my arrival, I was fortunately able to obtain employment with the repertory company of the Savannah Theater.

At first, I was again playing such small walk-on parts as I had begun my career with, for a pittance hardly sufficient to pay a boardinghouse-keeper for sleeping space and two meager meals a day. But my appearance and acting ability soon earned me better roles. Within a year, I was taking major parts and receiving accolades from the audiences for my performances.

Young men began to send me bouquets and cards requesting the opportunity to meet me. At first, this disturbed me, and I moodily refused to see any of them. Undaunted, they continued to send me flowers and cards and even gifts.

The bitterness and the desire to avenge myself against men such as those who had done me such great harm in the past were still strong within me. As I adjusted to my success, I started allowing some of the young men to be presented to me.

Whether I was graciously polite, or coy, then aloof, depended on my humor and the behavior of the man I was meeting. I was pleasant to the ones who seemed sincerely

respectful. With the lustful ones, I was flirtatious, then cold. It amused me to lift their hopes, only to dash them.

In time, I learned that I had become a challenge to young gallants. Some who had no interest in the theater at all attended my performances frequently and sent me bouquets in hope of achieving what the others had failed. To conquer me, it seemed, became a common ambition among them.

One evening, between acts, I was browsing through the cards that had come along with the flowers that filled my dressing room, when suddenly I saw a name that wrenched my stomach into a sick knot.

Hugh Marlin!

Aghast, I stared at it. The ornate copperplate penmanship blurred before my eyes. The image of his face, the feeling of his hands touching me, and his body forcing itself upon mine sent a horrible giddiness through me.

Had *he* been in the audience tonight watching me? My skin crawled at the idea of his gaze playing over me.

Had he recognized me?

No, I told myself, as I struggled to regain my composure. He believed that Laura Wickham had died years before. My whole appearance had altered since he last saw me. And he had known Laura Wickham only a few days. He could not have recognized me. The card in my hand was proof of that, wasn't it? He would hardly be sending flowers and asking an introduction to me if he knew I was the same girl he had abused and attempted to murder.

The whole of my terrible adventure on Savage Key was vivid in my mind, fueling the spark of spirit in me. I burned hot with anger at the people of Savage Key who had used me so cruelly and callously for their own purposes. I hated Hugh Marlin, and his mother, and Bram Ainsley. I longed to make them all suffer for what they had done to me.

The call boy interrupted my thoughts with his announcement that the curtain was about to go up on the final act of the play. Impulsively, I handed him the card and a coin, and told him to have the gentleman who had sent that card to come backstage after the closing curtain.

As I hurried into the wings, I regretted my rash action. But it was too late to call the boy back. I had to take my place for my entrance. Forcing Hugh Marlin from my thoughts, I concentrated intently on the role I had to step into in just a moment.

The fires of fear and anger burning in me seemed to give

an added luster to my performance in that act. When it was done, the audience called again and again for me to present myself.

All the while that I was taking bows, I was steeling myself for my meeting with Hugh Marlin and trying to see past the glare of the footlights into the boxes. I hunted Hugh Marlin's face. I could not find it.

He was waiting at my dressing room door.

I recognized him as I approached. At the sight of him, I almost panicked. Frantically, I glanced around for some means of escape. I felt that I could not possibly stand facing him and speaking to him. I would shatter.

He spotted me. With a smile, he started toward me.

I almost ran. It was only with great effort that I managed to stand where I was and retain a posture of dignity.

"Miss Leslie!" he said as he halted before me. His smile was a leer of pure lechery. "I am Hugh Marlin. I received your message."

To my amazement, I heard myself reply in a voice that was completely calm and steady. "I am delighted, Mister Marlin."

I suddenly felt as I did when the curtain opened on a new production. I was no longer myself, but the person whom I was required to portray. I became a woman of fire and steel and strength. Smiling at my own sense of purpose, I offered him my hand. "How kind of you to call."

"Your servant, ma'am." He lifted the hand to his lips. The gesture was not one of respectful greeting. Even against my fingers, his mouth expressed its sensual hunger. His tongue flicked over my skin.

I could not quite repress a shudder of revulsion.

He was aware of it, but when he looked up at me his expression told me that he had mistaken it for a quiver of passion.

The five years that had passed since I last saw Hugh Marlin had changed his appearance somewhat. His dark hair was graying at the temples and receding from his high forehead. He had altered the way he wore it in an attempt to cover the loss. He still shaved his jaw clean, exposing his firm, deeply cleft chin, but now he affected a full moustache as if to compensate for the loss of hair from his head.

The flare of his nostrils had thickened, giving a coarseness to his once-patrician nose. The skin under his eyes had a sag-

ging discolored look to it. His eyes, half-hidden under thick, languid lids, were webbed with the red of swollen veins.

Despite the ravages of time and dissipation, he still managed to exude a quality of suave, sensual handsomeness as he smiled at me. It was a quality that, in him, I found extremely revolting.

"I appreciate your generosity in receiving an humble admirer," he said. There was nothing of humility in his tone. "I wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed your performance. You were magnificent!"

"Why, thank you, Mister Marlin." I lowered my lashes demurely. "I'm afraid you exaggerate my importance in the play. Without the excellent support of the entire ensemble my performance would be nothing."

Expansively, he told me, "Miss Leslie, you might stand alone on the stage, never speaking a word, and still earn the undying admiration of every man in the theater!"

I lifted one brow in a teasing way. "You are far too kind!"

"It is you who are kind, lovely lady! And I wish to presume even further upon your kindness!"

"Sir?"

"There is a small party planned for tonight. It would do me great honor if you would allow me the pleasure of your company."

"How thoughtful of you!" I had no doubt that the party he planned would be quite small. Just two. Most probably in his rooms. I managed to keep all sarcasm out of my voice and make myself sound truly regretful as I said, "I am so sorry! I fear that I already have plans for tonight."

I saw a flash of anger mingle with the disappointment in his eyes. His smile was weak. "I should have realized you would have plans already. But would it not be possible for you to change them?"

"Totally impossible, I'm afraid. However, there is always tomorrow." As I spoke, I drifted my gaze from his face to his broad shoulders, well clad in a very expensive and perfectly tailored evening coat. I glanced at the diamond stickpin in his silk cravat, that slowly slid my gaze down his torso. Although the years of dissipation were marring his face, he had succeeded in keeping his body trim. His chest was full, his waist narrow, and his abdomen flat.

Remembering the feel of his body against mine, I shuddered.

The corners of his mouth quirked as he saw my slight

trembling. He appeared certain that I reacted in admiration of his body. There was a huskiness in his voice. "Tomorrow then? After the performance?"

I shook my head, thinking it would be less of a strain to meet him by daylight. Mind racing, I hunted words. "No, I—I should like to see you before that. For dinner, perhaps?"

Smiling smugly, he suggested that he could hire a carriage and take me for a pleasant drive before we dined.

If he hired a driver as well, there would be a third party present to inhibit him, I thought. If he drove himself, he would have his hands full of reins. I returned his smile as I accepted the invitation.

22

It was with difficulty that I shook off the lingering mood of my nightmares when I arose in the morning.

I rehearsed myself before my mirror in preparation for facing Hugh Marlin. I considered the questions I meant to ask. They had to be chosen carefully, so as not to betray my knowledge of Savage Key. I wanted to learn of the people and situation there. Had Captain Savage died of his illness? Had Pauline succeeded in grasping control of his fortune? Or had Bram Ainsley triumphed in acquiring power through his marriage to Jennifer Savage?

Damn Bram Ainsley! Why did he persist so in my mind? Would I never be free of him?

The hold his memory had upon me angered me as I dressed for my meeting with Hugh Marlin. I felt that only through revenge upon him could I ever rid myself of my longing for him. But I did not think I could possibly summon enough strength of will to face him and play my little games with him as I planned to play them with Hugh.

The dress I chose to wear had a polonaise of pale viridian over a flounced skirt of dark *vert émeraude*, with just a hint of a train. The polonaise was trimmed with bows and banded with a deep fringe of the darker green. The stylish side pocket was pleated and finished with a knot of flowing loops and silk ribbons. There was no bustle. The manner in which the skirt of the polonaise was slashed and draped and held, bunched behind with tasseled cords, gave it sufficient fullness.

My soft-crowned capote bonnet was trimmed with imitation tea roses and knots of dark *vert émeraude*. A pale scarf of surah silk wrapped around it, the loose ends falling behind. Over my shoulder, I carried a parasol of pale viridian with fringes of dark green to match the polonaise.

The various greens emphasized the creamy whiteness of my skin and made my hazel eyes look almost golden by contrast. A touch of carnation rouge applied carefully with a rabbit's foot added to the faint blush of color on my cheeks. An even subtler application of theatrical makeup gave my lashes the appearance of being even longer and darker than they really were. I used the same dark makeup to give my brows a saucy arch.

Appraising my image in the mirror, I could find no fault with it. My dress and makeup were quite flattering. And I bore hardly any resemblance at all to the Laura Wickham I had beheld in my mirror five years before.

To judge from Hugh's eyes when he called for me, the costume was effective. His gaze traveled the length of me with lustful admiration. I felt as if ants crawled over me, but I managed to maintain my smile and composure.

The carriage he had waiting at the door of my boarding-house was a landau with the top down and a liveried driver on the box. The team was a handsome pair of matched chestnuts. The equipage looked of quality and in good repair. I thought he must have paid well for the hire of it. Was it to impress me? I wondered. Or was it to impress the young blades who might see him out driving with the reputedly unattainable Elaine Leslie? I didn't doubt his eagerness to make all Savannah aware of his achievement.

Once I was settled on the carriage seat with my skirts gathered in, he took his place beside me and asked if I had any preference as to where we drove.

I did not want to stray from the areas of the city where there was regular traffic. Not with Hugh Marlin. I suggested we might circuit the old boundaries.

He lifted a brow, silently admitting that he did not know the boundaries I referred to.

"I have heard that the original city of Savannah, as laid out by General Oglethorpe, was encompassed by the four Broad Streets," I said.

"I know of three Broad Streets." His tone implied doubt that there was a fourth.

"Oh, it's generally called The Bay," I told him, and I recalled a rhyme I had heard often during my childhood in Savannah. Boys had chanted it when rallying for a game of hare-and hounds. "*East Broad, West Broad, South Broad and Bay; if you don't like our boundaries, you don't have to play.*"

"Ah, but I do like your boundaries very much, my dear! And I should be delighted to play!" Hugh said, reaching for my hand.

Pretending I did not notice, I deftly avoided his grasp by rearranging my skirts.

He rapped his stick on the floorboards and gave the driver instructions, then leaned back as if to relax for the ride. In

doing so, he managed to move himself even closer to me than he had been.

The driver snapped the reins and the team jolted the carriage into motion. Hugh's shoulder touched mine. I could not help flinching at the touch.

We drove past the theater, turning along Chippewa Square, then proceeding down Bull Street to turn again at the Chatham Academy building. The water wagons had laid much of the dust in the dirt streets. The well-sprung carriage rolled smoothly along South Broad. As we passed the old city cemetery, I noted that it had fallen into disrepair since I was a child in Savannah.

I had heard stories that some of General Sherman's troops had vandalized the cemetery scandalously during their occupation of the city. It was said that they had knocked down headstones and had broken into the vaults, supposedly to use them for shelter against the winter weather. But many Savannahians were of the opinion that they had done it to rob the dead.

It occurred to me that in a sense the man at my side was a grave robber. He had intended to steal Captain Savage's fortune away from the rightful heir once the captain was dead. I understood now that it was to prevent any possibility of my marrying Wesley Savage and somehow interfering with his own plans that Hugh Marlin had attempted to murder me.

He had failed in the murder. I wondered if he had succeeded in his theft of the Savage fortune.

At East Broad we turned toward the river, driving past the small, frame cottages that huddled next to the crumbling walls of old Fort Anthony Wayne. The gasworks now stood within the walls of the once-proud fort, and the cottages were on the grounds of the gardens that had been established by the original trustees of Savannah. They dated to the colonial period, when the settlement was young. Now occupied primarily by impoverished Irish immigrants without the means to keep them in good order, they were considered an eyesore by many. But I thought they had a quaint charm.

Hugh commented that it was unfortunate the area had never been thoroughly burnt out, leveled to ashes.

I protested that he misjudged the cottages. I admitted that they were shabby, but I thought that with repairs and paint, they would make attractive, cozy homes.

"They look like pigsties," he said.

"Things are not always as they appear on the surface," I

replied, thinking of Hugh himself. He appeared too be a respectable gentleman. But I knew him for a rapist and would-be murderer. I wondered if he had ever attacked any other woman as he had me. Perhaps he was, in fact, an accomplished murderer.

"Are you as you appear, my dear?" he asked with an insinuating arch of a brow. "Or do you hide a secret self behind that aloof facade?"

"Perhaps I shall reveal my true self to you in time," I answered, sardonically amused that he did not suspect my facade actually hid the vengeful heart of the woman he believed he had destroyed.

He smiled, obviously certain that I actually hid a burning ardor for him.

From East Broad we turned into Bay Street. This wide thoroughfare ran along the top of the bluff overlooking the Savannah River. It was set well back from the edge of the bluff, with much parklike land lying along it.

With only a few exceptions, the waterfront buildings stood on the bank of the river at the foot of the bluff, only their upper stories visible from The Bay. Spidery iron-railed footbridges stretched from the bluff over the narrow alleyway called Factors Walk to the upper-story entrances of the riverfront buildings.

Warehouses, counting houses, manufactories, and even a very good hotel stood shoulder to shoulder along the water, enjoying the cooling breezes. They blocked the view of the river from The Bay. It could be seen only through the gaps where cobbled ramps led down from the bluff to the bank.

As we drove along, I kept glancing through the gaps, trying to see the ships in port. I thought Hugh must have come to Savannah on a Savage vessel. Perhaps *The Savage Star.* Was it even now there in the river? Was Bram Ainsley at that moment in Savannah?

My attempts to spot *The Savage Star* were distracting me from Hugh and my purpose in being with him. It took some effort to maintain my end of our conversation.

" . . . very fortunate. I don't get to Savannah often, you know," he was saying.

"Then you are not a native of this city?" I said.

"No, I am from Virginia originally. My home is in Florida now," he replied.

I hoped he would go on to tell me something about his home. Instead, he spoke only of himself. "I'm seldom there. I

travel a good deal on business. That's what brings me to Savannah now. Much to my sorrow, I must be leaving in the morning. I have appointments farther north that must be kept. Very important business. But I will have these few brief moments with you, my dear, to cherish always."

He obviously wanted to make the most of the moment.

I wanted to avert his advances. And I was irked that so far he had not divulged any answers to my unspoken questions about the people of Savage Key. In a tone that was half-jesting, half-insulting, I exclaimed, "Surely you are not a *salesman!*"

In the decade since the War Between The States, it had become socially acceptable for a gentleman to enter business. He might be a merchant, but a common salesman was still a figure of disrepute among the gentry.

He answered with indignation, "Of course not! I am in shipping! You have heard of The Savage Line?"

I nodded and offered another jibe. "You are an *employee* of that firm?"

Like a salesman, an employee was a menial. Hugh scowled at the word. "I am an *owner!*"

That gave me one answer. Pauline was not in complete control of the Savage fortune. If she were, her arrogant son would have said he was *the* owner of The Savage Line. I wondered if it was Wesley who still held some command over the family business, or if Bram Ainsley had grasped power and position. Or could it be possible that Captain Savage still lived, and Hugh only expressed his ambitions for the future when he called himself an owner?

"How marvelous!" I said. Maneuvering for further information, I looked coyly at him from the corner of an eye. "Surely you must have a wife at home, Mister Marlin. A man such as yourself could not have escaped the wiles of some lucky woman!"

He beamed at the flattery. But he was wary of admitting to possession of a family. "Would it be correct for me to take such an attractive young lady as yourself for a drive and to dinner if I were married, Miss Leslie?"

I gave a little laugh and spoke with my eyes, using my skill as an actress to imply that I was not concerned with such trivial proprieties. "A girl can trust a married man."

He cocked a surprised brow at me.

"She can trust him never to implore her to abandon her career for common domesticity," I explained.

He laughed then and lied, "Were I free, my dear, I most assuredly would so implore you myself!"

"Then you are not free?" My tone was teasing.

He sighed, mocking regret. "I must admit that I do happen to be encumbered with a wife and a young daughter."

"A wife as lovely and loving as you deserve?"

The gaiety went out of his manner. His expression darkened. "A nagging shrew of a wife, and a sullen, spoiled brat of a child!"

"Oh! How terrible for you!" I forced myself to take his hand into mine and give it a squeeze of sympathy.

His smile returned. "Fortunately for me, she is far away."

"In Florida?"

"Yes."

"Alone?" I hoped he would tell me about her family.

"If you mean, does she have the pleasure of male companionship to entertain her while I'm away, the answer is no. My *dear* Henrietta would never consider betraying me. She has the utmost respect for the proprieties. And no opportunity whatever to violate them."

"Oh?"

"Our home is on a very isolated key. Nothing ever happens there, and we seldom have visitors. One must travel for entertainment and companionship." He put a particular emphasis on the last word, making it refer specifically to the companionship he hoped that he and I might enjoy together.

I ignored his insinuations, as if I were too naive to recognize them. "Then you have no neighbors, no friends, no family on the key?"

"I have my mother, thank God! She is a marvelous woman. Without her support, my life would be intolerable."

"Just you and your wife and child, and your mother live there?"

"No. My wife's family is also in residence. But they are poor company at best. Believe me, Savage Key is an impossible place to live!"

"*Savage Key!* What a curious name. Are there savages there?"

'Hardly. Such Indians as live there are quite tame. Savage is a family name. As in The Savage Line."

"Oh, of course! I should have realized that." I looked askance at him and put an edge in my voice. "Your wife is a member of the Savage family, then?"

He bridled at my hint that he might have married to

achieve his position in her family's business. Gruffly, he replied, "It does happen that she is. However, I was associated with the Savages long before she and I wed."

"Then it was through your position with the company that you met her?"

"No," he admitted. "We met as children. My father died when I was very young. My mother remarried. Her husband is Captain Garrick Savage."

I caught the word *is*. It implied that the captain still lived. I asked, "Do your mother and stepfather reside with you, or do they have a home of their own?"

"He's not my stepfather," he said bitterly. "The old bas— he never adopted me. If he had, it would hardly have been proper for me to marry his daughter."

It would hardly have been *necessary*, I thought. A legally adopted son would have enjoyed some rights as an heir.

I arched a brow at his tone and said, "I take it you are not fond of your father-in-law?"

His emotions overrode his discretion. He told me, "Hardly! He's a damned nuisance! Worse than that! He's totally incompetent. He's been a helpless, bedridden invalid for years. He should have been dead long ago. I believe the damned old fool persists in staying alive out of spite! He despises me and my mother!"

"Oh, no!" I feigned appalled surprise and sympathy. "How terrible for you!"

He nodded in agreement. "My mother and I should be in control of the business. The captain is unfit to make decisions. But whenever we bring in doctors and lawyers to examine him, he manages to appear in full command of his faculties. But he's not! Do you understand? He's not fit to have all that money!"

His hatred of Captain Savage overwhelmed him. His face reddened, veins swelling and pulses throbbing visibly as he spilled out his anger to me. "The damned old fool has a lily-livered weakling of a son who keeps the company books. He's willed everything but a widow's dower to the boy. To Wesley! *We're* the ones who should have it all! It should all come to my mother and me!"

I had gotten answers to some of my questions. I wanted to know more of Bram Ainsley. Had he married Jennifer Savage? I asked, "His son and your wife are the only heirs?"

"No, dammit!" He sounded as if he might cheerfully have murdered Wesley if there had not been others between him

and the Savage fortune. "The old man has another daughter besides my wife. She's gone and married a damned arrogant bastard who captains one of the ships and has his thumb in the management of the business. He has ambitions of taking control of the company himself when the old man dies. And she's gone and let the bastard sire a whelp on her to secure his claim!"

I had been prepared for the news that Bram and Jennifer were wed, but it had not occurred to me that there might be children of the union. The knowledge sent a shock of emotional pain through me that was beyond my comprehension. Suddenly I felt an icy sweat, and my head spun as if I were about to faint.

I swayed forward. Hugh grabbed me into his arms. He took the opportunity to clasp me tightly to him. The horror of his embrace revived me. I gasped out a little scream.

Our driver jerked the carriage to a halt. He looked back at us with concern. "Something wrong with the missy, cap'n?"

Releasing me, Hugh glowered at him.

I stammered that I had felt faint for a moment.

"I trust that you are not ah unwell?" Hugh asked me.

"It was only a touch of giddiness. Perhaps hunger," I said, adding coyly, "I'm afraid that in my hurry to be prepared tor our meeting today, I failed to enjoy a proper breakfast."

He smiled at the flattery. Drawing a large watch in an ornate gold hunting-case from a vest pocket, be snapped up the lid and glanced at the dial. "Yes, it is time for dinner. Driver, take us on to the Pulaski House."

Hugh returned the timepiece to his pocket. As he had embraced me, I'd felt a solid object between us, apparently in one of his pockets. I did not think it had been the watch. A vague thought stirred in my mind. I said, "You have something else in your pocket, I believe. I felt something between us. Something hard that hurt me."

"Something –? Oh, yes, my pistol."

The thought began to take definite shape. "A pistol? May I see it?"

"Are you interested in firearms, Miss Leslie?" He looked at me curiously. "Females are usually frightened of weapons."

"I know very little about them," I admitted. "But I was required to shoot one in a play I appeared in. It was a huge, noisy, smelly thing. It was only loaded with a half-charge of powder and a paper wad, but I had to hold it tightly in both hands to keep it from flying away from me when I fired it."

He gave a little laugh of masculine superiority and took the pistol from his pocket to show it to me. It was much smaller than the weapon I had used on stage. That had been a huge, old, horse pistol that I could hardly manage. One of the men had always loaded it, and even cocked it for me, before the scene I used it in. My hands had not been strong enough to pull back the heavy hammer.

Hugh's pistol was hardly as large as the palm of his hand. There was a double barrel, the one above the other. It was nickel-plated, engraved with a pattern of twining vines. The grips were of nacre.

"It's pretty!" I said, truly surprised by its dainty appearance and artistic decoration. "But it's so small! Could one really do any harm with such a little thing?"

My feminine innocence of such matters amused him. He told me, "It could kill a man quite dead."

I looked at him from the corner of my eye. My heart seemed to stop for a moment, knotting with the thrill and horror of the thought that was now fully formed in my mind.

I had to moisten my lips before I could speak. It was with some difficulty that I kept my voice steady. "How does one fire it?"

He showed me the hammer and the trigger. Thumbing back a little latch on the side, he swung the barrel assembly up on a hinge and ejected the two stubby metal cartridges that had nestled within. While it was empty, he let me hold it.

Although the hammer was stiff, I was able to thumb it back to full-cock position in the manner he advised. At his instruction, I squeezed the trigger and felt the snap as the firing pin fell. I was pleased at how easy it was to use. I laughed lightly, a bit nervously.

He laughed with me, enjoying what appeared to him to be my awe of the weapon.

As we approached the Pulaski House, he took the gun back from me, reinserted the cartridges, then closed the barrel assembly and latched it. The pistol was resting again in his pocket, loaded and ready to be used, when we halted before the hotel.

The Pulaski House was rather old and not nearly so ornate as the luxurious hotels to be found in larger cities, but it had one of the finest dining rooms in Savannah. A very deferential waiter showed us to a table in a secluded corner that was given additional privacy by groupings of potted rubber plants

and baskets of Boston fern. I felt certain Hugh must have paid amply in advance for the service we received.

The steward brought wine. When Hugh had sampled and approved it, he poured for us. I sipped cautiously, discovering the flavor excellent and heady, but I had no desire to dull my wits with drink. At the first opportunity, I surreptitiously disposed of a good part of the drink in the pot of the nearest plant.

As was the local custom, the meal was long and leisurely. We began with Savannah's famed terrapin soup. The fish course was boiled trout. That was followed by turkey with giblet gravy and boiled ham. Then we were served shrimp stuffed with crabmeat, roast duck, and deviled crab, along with a variety of vegetables and breads. For dessert we had blancmange and Dolly Varden cake. With each course, an appropriate wine was served.

Hugh drank liberally, keeping up a steady chatter that was filled with hints of the pleasures we might enjoy together before he had to leave Savannah.

When we had completed the meal, I retired for a short rest in the lounge that was provided for ladies, while he indulged in his after-dinner cigar and brandy. During my moments of privacy, I steeled myself for the ordeal still ahead of me. I had but little time left. Only the remainder of this day, for he was planning to sail in the morning.

If I were to have my revenge, I would have to act that very night.

23

Hugh offered to deliver me to the stage door of the theater. Advising discretion, I suggested he let me out of the carriage a block away. From there, I could walk.

When he asked if he might meet me after the show that evening, I again recommended he be discreet. I proposed that instead of meeting me at the theater, he come to my boardinghouse after the other residents were abed.

I told him I would pretend to retire, then sneak down and unlock the door for him. He was to creep in quietly, relock the door, and go secretly to my room, where I would be awaiting him.

He agreed eagerly.

When he helped me down from the carriage, I spoke silently to him with the pressure of my hand on his, and with a look of longing in my eyes.

"Until later," I said, my whisper filled with hints and implications.

He smiled smugly, his eyes agleam with anticipation. "Later, my dear!"

I waited until he had driven off, then turned a corner, heading away from the theater. I walked rapidly. If I were to complete my task, then be backstage in time to be in costume and makeup by first call, I had to hurry.

By the time I had reached the nearest pharmacy and purchased a large paper of sleeping powder, the sky had clouded over. By the time I got to the theater, it was beginning to drizzle.

The rain thinned our audience. That was just as well. I did not give a good performance. My mind was much too occupied with my plans. I could not totally immerse myself in my role onstage. I kept thinking instead of the role I would have to play later.

During the first intermission, I claimed a headache and sent a boy to find a pharmacist who would sell some sedative powder at that hour. In truth, my head had begun to ache dully, but I would not waste any of the powder I had obtained on myself. I might need every grain later. And I did not wish to impair my faculties with a drug.

When I reached my boardinghouse after the show, I told

my landlady that I was feeling somewhat upset because I had glimpsed a strange man who seemed to be following me on my way home. Saying I was afraid I would have difficulty sleeping, I asked if she had any powder I might borrow.

She gave me a packet.

Armed with three papers of strong sedative, I went to my room and prepared tea over the lamp. While the water was heating, I changed from my street clothes to a nightgown and robe. My fingers trembled as I put my hair into braids. Facing myself in the mirror, I rehearsed my story.

Surely no one would hold a woman to blame for shooting a man who forced his way into her bedchamber with the vilest of intentions.

I told myself that even if I were blamed and judged guilty of murder, my revenge would be worth the price.

A part of me insisted that it would not A part of me insisted that there could be no justification for murder under any circumstances. It kept forcing the thought on me that if I committed such an act, I would become as much a sinner as the man I intended to punish.

I tried to still that secret voice, but it persisted. Even as I tiptoed down the darkened stairway to unbolt the outside door, it made my steps hesitant and my hands shake.

Returning to my room, I poured myself a cup of tea. I hoped it would steady my nerves.

I jumped at the small, light rap on my door as if it had been totally unexpected. Swallowing at the lump in my throat, I went to answer it. My hand trembled as I reached for the latch. My eyes blurred and burned. My mouth and throat felt unbearably dry. My bones seemed hollow, without substance enough to support me. The voice within my head screamed at me to send him away—forget my plans for vengeance and go one with my peaceful life as Elaine Leslie.

He called softly through the door. "Elaine?"

His lust echoed even in that single word. The image of his face as he bent over me that night in the skiff, as he reached out to ravage me, leaped vividly into my mind.

I jerked back the latch and swung open the door.

Hugh stood before me, the lecherous expectation in his face undisguised. He was carrying a bottle. His red-veined eyes and sour breath told me he had already indulged to excess.

"At last!" he breathed, pushing into the room and thrusting

the bottle at me. "A small gift, my dear! One we may enjoy together!"

As I accepted it, he tried to grasp me in his arms. I barely eluded him with a quick twist of my body and darted from him to hold the bottle near the lamp as if I were very interested in reading the label. It was no mild wine, but a strong French cognac.

He stepped up behind me. His fingers touched my hair. They drew a braid back from my shoulder. I could feel his hot, fetid breath on my skin as he leaned close to press his mouth hungrily against my neck.

My heart pounded. My whole body was so taut that it ached. It took effort for me to accept his touch without pulling away. With all the power of will I possessed, I forced myself into the role I intended to play. I lifted a hand and gently caressed his cheek. Very softly, I spoke his name.

He pressed his body against mind.

I could not prevent the sharp wince that jerked me away from him as a wave of revulsion swept through me. With a shiver of dismay, I thought that I might not be able to go through with my plan.

But if I could not—

There was no escaping him now. I must not even think of failure. I *had* to play my part through to the final curtain.

I turned to face him, back-stepping and holding the bottle between us, making a small barrier of it.

He still loomed much too near to me. His oppressive presence was overwhelming me. I felt a touch of giddiness. My hands gripped the bottle so hard that my knuckles hurt. When I found my voice, it snagged in my throat.

"Shall we open this?" I said.

"Do you need something to warm your blood, my dear?" He arched a brow at me. It was obvious that he thought his own presence sufficient for that purpose.

I managed to shape a smile of sorts. "Hardly! But it looks so lovely!" I turned the bottle a bit, catching flashes of lamplight in the liquid depths, while my mind scrambled for words to stall him. "And it was so kind of you to bring it. And—and—I should like to savor the moments of anticipation!"

"The savor of anticipation does not compare to the flavor of fulfilment," he replied. But he eased back from me. Producing a corkscrew from a pocket, he took the bottle, broke the seal, and wrenched out the stopper.

"Glasses?" he asked.

I glanced around, aware that my little rented room was ill equipped for entertaining. I had but one tumbler for drinking water. But I had teacups. I had already set out two of them in their saucers on the dresser.

I told him, "I don't have the proper glasses. I don't have any glasses at all. Will teacups do?"

He laughed. "I suppose they must."

I wanted to pour the drinks myself. Reaching for the bottle, I suggested, "You make yourself comfortable. I'll do this."

With a leering grin, he let me take the bottle. He removed his hat and set it on a small table by the door. Then he shrugged out of his coat and draped it over the back of the winged chair in the corner.

I watched his reflection in the mirror as I went to the dresser. Before his arrival, I had emptied a packet of sleeping powder into one of the teacups. I had not dared put in more than a single packet for fear that the mild flavor of the tea would not cover the taste of too much powder.

The brandy would have a far stronger flavor than the tea. I decided to chance adding more powder to the drink.

My fingers trembled as I slipped a hidden packet from under the doily on the dresser. While I opened it and spilled the powder into his cup, I kept an eye on his image in the mirror.

He removed his cravat and collar and unbuttoned his vest before he sunk with a deep sigh into the chair. Stretching his legs out before him, he crossed them at the ankles and leaned back, lolling at ease.

I poured brandy into the cups. My own cup already held the tea I had been sipping when he arrived. It took but a very small amount of brandy to top it off and make it appear full.

The powder in his cup did not dissolve readily without stirring. Picking up the cup, I swirled it. Still, there was some residue visible in the bottom. I paused to lower the flame of the lamp before I took the cup to him. With the light dimmed, I hoped that he would not notice the residue.

My heart was pounding violently. I could not completely suppress the shaking of my hand when I offered the cup to him.

I had filled it with as much brandy as if I had been pouring tea. He cocked a brow at the quantity of the drink I gave

him, and commented, "You think me very thirsty, don't you?"

"I think a single teacup of brandy would be but a small sampling to a man such as yourself, Mister Marlin." My tone suggested that I meant my words as a compliment.

The flattery brought a laugh from him. The laugh told me that, like so many foolishly self-centered men, he prided himself on his capacity to swill hard liquor. Taking the cup, he held it out to toast. "To this night, my dear!"

"To this night!" I repeated after him, lifting my own cup. I looked at him over its rim with the most bewitching expression I could muster.

His eyes stayed on mine as he raised his cup to his lips. He did not take the time to savor the aroma of the brandy. Demonstrating his prowess as a drinker, he swallowed at it as if it were merely water meant to quench his thirst.

His sudden scowl told me he found the taste at fault I felt my heart leap into my throat, leaving a sickly empty hollow in my breast. My stomach wrenched with fear. My plot was discovered!

How could I explain? Could I possibly bluff him? My mind raced, hunting words. Striving desperately to maintain an air of innocence, I asked, "Is something wrong?"

He considered the brandy a moment more, then looked at me. There was no accusation in his face. Not yet. He said, "Is yours bitter?"

I sipped cautiously. Nodded. "Somewhat."

"Damn!" he exploded. "They've cheated me! *Me!* Hugh Marlin! With an old trick like that!"

"What?" I asked in genuine surprise. It appeared he had not recognized my trap after all.

"It's happened before," he growled. "The wine seller drains off a portion of the good cognac and fills the empty space in the bottle with the worst sort of cheap brandy. Then he puts a false seal on it and sells it as pure! I'll have my money back for this bottle, and more to boot! He won't have the better of Hugh Marlin, I guarantee!"

Relief washed through me, sweeping away the terror I had felt. In its wake came renewed strength of will. I had a plan and I wanted to carry it through.

Clinging to the role I meant to play, I made a moue. "You mean you're going to return this brandy to the seller? We can't drink any more of it?"

My distressed expression brought a laugh from him. "My

dear, we shall drink as much as we wish. Hugh Marlin needs no evidence to impress his case. My word will get me justice from the thief. My word and, if necessary, my stick across the villain's back a few times! My dear, drink up! Have all you want!"

He lifted his cup and drank again, expecting me to emulate him.

I took another sip from mine.

When he set his cup down, it was empty. As if eager to serve him, I asked if I might refill it for him.

"Alas, no," he sighed. With an insinuating smirk, he added, "Too much of this can debilitate a man, you know."

I looked teasingly at him. "I shouldn't think that anything could debilitate such a man as yourself."

"You're right! Especially when I have such a lovely morsel awaiting me! Yes! Here, fill it again!" Beaming, he handed the cup to me.

I emptied the third packet of sleeping powder into the cup before putting in more brandy Knowing that the powders would not take effect immediately, I searched for ways to stall his impatience as I gave the drink to him.

With a glance at his outstretched legs, I suggested, "Darling, you can't possibly be comfortable with your boots on. Let me help you remove them."

"You are a thoughtful little creature, my dear." He glowed at the attentions that flattered his already inflated opinion of himself.

Kneeling, I took one of his feet in my hands. He was wearing ankle-high Cordovan gaiters with buckled straps. I commented on their luxurious appearance. He told me about having them made by a craftsman in New York and mentioned that he intended to have another pair fitted while he was in that city during the summer.

While I unbuckled one boot and removed it, I praised the fabric of his trousers. As I took the other foot in hand, he told me about the Baltimore tailor who fashioned most of his clothing for him.

I spent as much time as I could in the process of removing his boots and discussing his attire. He seemed as vain about clothing as any woman. He whined of the difficulty of obtaining decent fabrics, and of the sloppy workmanship that the tailors would try to foist off on him if he did not keep close personal watch on the apparel as they fitted it.

"Arrogant," he complained, and I could hear a thickening

of his tongue in the way he slurred his words. "All of them are a damned arrogant lot of bastards who lack the proper respect for their betters. That's the trouble with a republican form of government such as ours, my dear. It gives the unwashed masses and gutter trash foolish notions of their own worth. Gives them ash—aspirations above their stations." His choice of words amused him. With a chuckle, he repeated, "Aspirations above their stations!"

Then he frowned. "Like that damned Ainsley bastard! Son of a whore! Not fit to lick my boots, but he has ambitions to step into them! Thinks he can take what's rightfully mine! Thinks he can take the Savage fortune away from me!"

A pang of yearning stabbed through me at the mention of Bram Ainsley. Why, oh why, did Hugh have to refer to him? Why couldn't I rid myself of the cursed desire my body felt for a man I loathed?

I told myself that I must not be distracted by thoughts of Bram Ainsley. I must not let anything swerve me from the course of action I had chosen or the role I meant to play tonight.

Hugh's boots were off. I set them out of the way beside the chair. As I started to rise from my knees, he leaned forward, grabbing me. Startled, I fell across his lap. He pulled me tightly into his arms. I could feel the throbbing of his lust for me.

The horror that swelled through me was beyond the control of my will. I could not accept his embrace. With a wrenching effort, I tried to free myself.

"Don't be coy with me now, my pretty!" he snapped impatiently.

"No—not—not coy!" I stammered, trying to maintain the role I played even though my whole being was desperate to escape his arms. "I—I feel ill! I'm afraid that I—I—"

I made a sound of gagging. He released me quickly, shoving me away from him.

I staggered weakly to the bed and leaned both hands on the footboard. My every fiber trembled. My bones felt as if they might crumble. Drawing slow, deep breaths, I attempted to steady myself.

Hugh rose to tower over me. Anger lurked in his voice. "You aren't *indisposed,* are you?"

It occurred to me that I might be able to halt what I had begun by telling him that my time of month had come on me. I sensed that he was too fastidious to press himself upon

me under such circumstances. He would probably stalk out in petulant fury and search for some other female to satisfy his desires.

Or—I realized—he might expend his frustrated fury on me before leaving. I remembered how much he had enjoyed hurting me when I failed to give him the kind of response he had desired from me that night in the skiff.

My body shook with panic as I thought that in luring him to my room, I had trapped myself. If the powders failed to take effect, he would use me and abuse me as he had before.

His hand grabbed my shoulder. His fingers dug into my flesh as he jerked me about to face him. He glared at me suspiciously. "Are you with child? Did you bring me here thinking to accuse me of siring someone else's bastard?"

"No, no, no!" I rolled my head from side to side in denial. His grip was driving spears of pain through my shoulder.

"Then what the devil is wrong with you?" he demanded.

As my frantic mind scrambled for a reply, he suddenly released me. Putting a hand to his temple, he scowled. Then he turned to look angrily toward the dresser. "It's that damned rotgut they used to adulterate the cognac! I can feel it now myself! Dizzy! Damn!"

At last the powders were taking effect! I could see a haziness in his eyes. He put both hands to his head as if to hold it steady.

My terror ebbed. Triumphantly, I thought that my plan would not fail. I would have my revenge!

Once more, I managed to force myself into the role I wished to play. "Poor Hugh! Does your head ache?"

"Damned rotgut," he mumbled thickly.

"Come, sit down." I gestured at the chair.

He swayed as he walked. With a grunt, he dropped heavily into the chair. Looking up at me, he whined, "Do something!"

"What?"

"My head is spinning! Make it stop!"

Although I was loath to so much as touch him, I put my fingertips to his temples and began to massage lightly. I crooned, "Just relax, darling. This will make you feel better."

He made a murmuring sound. The heavy lids began to droop over his eyes. Soon they were closed and his head lolled limply to one side. He started to snore.

The powders had done their work.

Emotionally exhausted, I could not go on. I had to have a

few moments of rest. Going back to the bed, I sat down on it and slumped my face into my hands. My own head throbbed, and my mouth was very dry.

I longed to sleep. I yearned to sink into a deep oblivion of total darkness. But I could not. I had to find the strength to complete what I had begun. The powders would not keep Hugh unconscious forever. I had to act.

Thinking that perhaps a bit of tea would brace me, I started to take a drink from my cup. The scent of it reminded me that I had added brandy to the tea there. I did not want to dull my senses.

I emptied the cup into the slop jar, rinsed it thoroughly, then filled it from the pot. The tea in the pot had been steeping for some time. It was tepid but quite strong. It did seem to help revive me.

Hugh was sprawled in the winged chair, snoring noisily. On tiptoe, I went around behind the chair and took his coat from it. Hunting through the pockets, I found the little pistol.

That afternoon in the carriage, he had shown me all I needed to know about handling it. At such close range, I would not have to be skilled in aiming it. I could not miss. I would simply have to point it and cock it and pull the trigger.

I opened it, just as I had watched him do, and assured myself that the cartridges were in place. Closing it, I snugged down the latch, then tested the feel of the pistol in my hand.

It was very solid, and rather heavy for such a small object. It looked quite pretty with its nickel gleaming softly in the dim lamplight. It did not look capable of causing death.

My thumb caressed the hammer.

But first there were preparations to be made. If I meant to claim that he had forced his way into my room and attempted to assault me, I had to arrange the scene properly.

I looked about me. The open bottle of cognac was still sitting on the dresser. I had to hide it and the cup that Hugh had drunk from.

Then -of course a man would not take off his boots and put them neatly out of the way before making a sudden attack on a woman. Nor would she wait docilely for him to do it, unless she was agreeable to his intentions. I had to put the boots back onto his feet.

Picturing the scene I meant to describe to the authorities, I decided that he might possibly take off his coat but he wouldn't pause to drape it carefully over the back of a chair.

I threw the coat down on the floor.

What else?

He wouldn't be sitting down.

I would have to move him out of the chair. The thought of trying to handle his body appalled me. I told myself firmly that it must be done.

What if he woke when I tried to move him?

It must be done!

I had to steel myself. I had to remember all of the evil I had seen in him. I had to relive in my mind the vicious cruelty of his attack on me, the pleasure he had taken in tormenting me, the callousness with which he had rid himself of me when he was done.

My mind writhed at the painful images I evoked. Fueled by them, the vengeful fires within me burned to white heat. I began to feel feverish, caught up in a sickly nightmare.

Over and over, I repeated to myself that this thing must be done, not merely in retribution for the abuses he had committed upon me, but to save other poor innocent girls from his ravages in the future.

I reached out toward him. My trembling hands touched his shoulders.

He groaned.

I froze in terror.

He did not awaken.

My heart was a stone in my throat. I could scarcely draw breath past it. My hands shook so fiercely that I was barely able to control them as I pulled him toward me, then slipped my arms under his.

Bracing, I took his weight against me.

My flesh crawled at the contact of his body.

He was very limp, very heavy. I staggered, almost falling, as I dragged him up from the chair and held him in my arms His face was too close to mine. The stench of his fetid breath sickened me.

Giddy again, I fought to keep from fainting as I maneuvered his bulk toward the door. I released him and he fell sprawling on the carpet.

Exhausted in both mind and body, I slumped to the floor myself. I sat braced on both arms, my head hanging, my whole body heaving from my terrible efforts and from my awareness of what was yet to be done.

When at last I was able to collect myself, I thought of one more thing that I needed to do to substantiate my story.

Shuddering with disgust as I did it, I opened the fly of his trousers.

In the deep, drugged sleep, he was flaccid. The sight was revolting. My stomach cramped as I beheld him, and I was certain that I would be ill My eyes snapped shut. I scuttled away from him on my hands and knees.

I lingered long moments behind my closed eyelids, hearing his snores and the fierce pounding of my own heart. I felt as if it would burst through my ribs.

Again, I had to recapture the images of that ghastly night when he attacked me. I needed all of the loathing for him that was in me to revive my strength.

The memories returned vividly.

Opening my eyes, I stood up and retrieved the pistol. I pointed it at his chest.

My thumb tugged at the hammer.

It moved slowly back.

I heard a click and felt it catch at full cock.

Now I had but to pull the trigger.

In my mind, I could feel the little weapon jump in my hand as it fired. I could envision the sudden hole in Hugh Marlin's chest, spilling out his life blood. I could see the blood as clearly as if the act were done. A dark stain of blood spreading slowly around his hands as he pressed them to his ribs.

I saw his face.

Not the face of Hugh Marlin, but the face of Bram Ainsley. I saw him in my memory as if it were happening at that very moment.

I was standing by the door of his cabin aboard *The Savage Queen*. In my fear, I had slashed him with a razor. I had drawn his blood. It had spilled, warm and sticky, onto my own hand.

Giving a shake of my head, I tried to force away those memories. I tried to regain the others—the memories of Hugh as he ravaged me, then attempted to murder me.

But I could not free myself of the vision of Bram Ainsley's blood on my hand.

And I could not pull the trigger of the pistol.

24

I huddled on the floor in a corner of my bedroom. Slowly, my hysterical sobbing began to ease. Through a blur of tears, I looked at Hugh Marlin.

He lay sprawled in front of the door, as motionless as a bundle of abandoned clothing. Only the sound of his snores broke the night silence and assured me that he was still a living being.

I knew that in time he would stir. He would awaken. What would I do then?

I had to free myself from the panicky fear that had gripped me. I had to think clearly and carefully.

I could flee before he roused. Run away where he might never find me.

But if I did that, I would have gained nothing and lost everything—my reputation, my career, the life that I had worked to make for myself since I became Elaine Leslie—all of this would be gone, and Hugh Marlin would suffer nothing but a moment of disappointment.

I could beg help. I could claim that he had come to my room and attempted to ravage me. But he would deny it. He would realize that I had led him into a trap. He would question my purpose. Perhaps he would even discover that I was Laura Wickham.

And then?

I feared him.

He was a man of position and influence. I was merely an actress, considered something less than respectable by many. Who would take my word against his? Who would believe that he had once attempted to murder me? If I accused him publicly, I would suffer. And he most likely would not. My sword of revenge would be turned to strike at me instead of my intended victim.

Although it was beyond my power to murder Hugh Marlin in cold blood, the longing for vengeance against him still burned within me. I did not want to let this opportunity escape me. But if I could not bring myself to kill him, what could I do in retribution?

What might I take from him that he cared for as much as he did life itself?

The Savage fortune!

Captain Savage had wanted me to marry his son so that I might control Wesley's inheritance and protect it from Hugh and his mother. The things Hugh had said during our conversations together suggested it might not be too late.

How could I put myself into a position where I might maneuver Wesley into marriage? How could I return to Savage Key?

Did I dare return?

I wiped at the tears that clung to my lashes. With determination I got to my feet. Going to the dresser, I looked at myself in the mirror.

My eyes felt gummy and hot. My cheeks stung from the tears I had shed. They were mottled with red blotches. I poured a little water from the pitcher into the basin and washed my face. The cool water felt good. It eased the flush in my skin and cleared my vision.

I looked again at my reflection, considering the possibilities.

Drawing my braids to the back of my head, I coiled them into a tight bun and pinned them there. In the past, I had always worn my hair so that it provided a flattering soft frame for my face. When I pulled it back severely, it changed my appearance. My features looked sharper, and older. I assumed a stern expression and the change became even more pronounced.

There was very little trace of Laura Wickham visible in the image that gazed back at me from the glass. I thought that I did not even resemble the glamourous Elaine Leslie very much.

In the role of Elaine Leslie, I had managed to deceive Hugh Marlin. As yet someone else, might I be able to deceive those people on Savage Key who had seen me only briefly some five years before?

I poured myself a cup of tea. It was cold and the taste was vile, but I wanted the stimulation of it. I had a lot of thinking to do before Hugh Marlin awoke.

The glow of dawn found me curled in the winged chair with the empty teacup on the floor beside me and the plan at last well formed in my mind. I had not slept. I felt no need for sleep. The tensions of my situation had driven away any trace of weariness.

There was much to be done before Hugh revived. But he did not look likely to open his eyes soon. His face was slack.

His mouth hung loosely open, the fleshy lips sagging. The stubble of his dark beard gave his jaw a sickly bluish cast. The angle of the lamplight showed the cleft in his chin, making it appear almost as if it were a sore or a pox scar. In sleep, he lost all traces of the sensual handsomeness he managed to achieve while awake. It was as if his face while awake was a mask that fell away while he was unconscious.

I went first to the bed and rumpled it thoroughly. I rolled upon it, impressing the moss-filled mattress with the weight of my body. When I was satisfied that it appeared to have been well used, I took out the cognac bottle I had hidden earlier. I emptied the remaining brandy into the chamber pot and thrust the pot far under the bed. I put the empty bottle on its side on the floor. I returned Hugh's pistol to the coat pocket I had taken it from and replaced the coat on the back of the chair. I set the empty teacups haphazardly on the floor near the bottle.

Glancing around, I could see nothing else to be done to the room. As to myself, remembering the night in the skiff, I made a ragged tear in the neck of my nightgown. I ripped the cloth almost to the waist. My shoulder, where Hugh had gripped it in anger, showed the discoloration of bruises.

Going to Hugh, I knelt at his side and once more removed his boots. As I did it, he stirred a bit, mumbling and groaning. I froze, breath held, heart pounding, until he subsided into motionless snoring. Then, gently, slowly, I stripped him of his vest and trousers.

Although the sight of his bare flaccid flesh was still revolting to me, I now found it somewhat amusing as well. I realized then that the overwhelming panic I had felt earlier had not been due solely to my fear of Hugh Marlin. It had resulted in a large part from my inner dread of the terrible deed I intended to commit. Now that I was no longer trying to steel myself to do murder, I found I had far more self-control. A part of my mind was even able to look upon what I did now as if it were a spectator attending a play.

My new plan might be dangerous, but it appealed to the romantic—to the actress—in me. It had a fine dramatic irony about it. I could almost laugh as I remembered how Captain Savage had insisted with absolute certainty that in time I would come around and agree to marry Wesley, just as he wished.

I was not strong enough to drag Hugh's limp weight up

onto the high bed. Fetching a damp cloth, I seated myself on the floor next to him.

As I wiped at his face, he stirred. I could sense the beginnings of awareness in him. Leaning close, I said softly, "Hugh, dearest, wake up. It's morning."

He made small gurgling sounds deep in his throat. His lashes flickered. His thick, languid eyelids lifted slowly, as if with great effort. The eyes they revealed were gummed with rheum, the whites shot through with horribly swollen veins.

He groaned.

I shaped an expression and tone of complete naiveté. "Whatever are you doing on the floor?"

Again, he groaned. His brow furrowed as he attempted to focus his eyes on me. I could see that he was not successful. He appeared to perceive only blurs. Thickly, as if his tongue were nearly immobile, he mumbled, "Elaine?"

"Yes, dearest?"

"Wha—what happened?"

"Darling!" I said as if his question stung me deeply. "Don't you remember!"

"No."

"But you—I—we—oh, Hugh! How can you say you don't remember!"

He looked completely bewildered.

"Did our—our *passion* have so little meaning for you?" I sniffled.

It was obvious that he was still very groggy from the heavy doses of the drug that I had given him. He licked at his lips as he mulled through whatever memories he managed to assemble for himself. With yet another groan, he said, "It must have been that bad brandy. Do you feel—uh—strange?"

"I feel marvelous! Oh, Hugh, you're so wonderful!"

Propping himself on an elbow, he held an unsteady hand out toward me. With a weak but hopeful leer, he said, "Come here. Help me feel the same."

I did not flinch. I let him put his hand to my head and draw my face toward his as if I would actually welcome his mouth on mine. I succeeded in containing the shudder of revulsion I felt at the fetid reek of his breath. But I meant to go no further. Before his lips could touch mine, I asked with childlike innocence, "What time does your ship sail?"

"Oh, God, the ship!" He let his hand fall away from my head. I sat back unkissed.

"Do we have time?" I said.

"What time is it now?"

"Dawn."

As if his neck were painfully stiff, he turned his head slowly, looking around the room. When he spotted his vest crumpled on the floor, he sat up and reached for it. Catching an edge, he dragged it into his lap. All of his movements were awkward. Apparently his night of drugged sleep on the floor had filled his body with aches.

Tugging the hunting watch from its pocket in the vest, he snapped open the lid and squinted at the dial. Giving a discouraged grunt, he rubbed at his eyes, then studied the dial again.

"A little over three hours until sailing time," he muttered, closing the watch. He looked at the wrinkled vest. Gave it a shake. Looked at it again. The wrinkles were still there. He scowled at the garment as if it did him an intentional disservice. "I can't go aboard in this. I've got to get back to my hotel and change."

I widened my eyes and said in a tone of disappointment, "Must you go, dearest?"

He grunted in reply. With more grunts and groaning, he stood up. I had to avert my eyes to keep from laughing aloud at the absurd figure he presented in his bedraggled shirttails, with nothing to cover his nakedness below them.

Leaning heavily on the back of the chair, he asked me to hand him his trousers.

I held them for him as he struggled one leg in, then the other. All the while, he swayed and clung to the chair for support.

Once he had the trousers buttoned, I told him, "Sit down, Hugh, dearest I'll get your boots for you."

Sighing, he slumped into the chair.

I caressed his foot before I thrust a boot onto it.

He gazed at me. "You are a darling! I hate to leave you!"

"Must you?"

"I have business in New York," he said.

During our conversations the preceding day, he had made mention of his business in New York, implying that it was imperative he be there on time. Even so, I was tense with fear that he might say yes when I asked, "Can't you delay? Just for a few days?"

"I *have* to be there," he whined. His sagging face drooped even further as he admitted to me, "It isn't exactly business

this time. There was a small misunderstanding when I was in New York last. A small difficulty with the law."

Startled, I lifted my brows. "You're in trouble with the law."

"No, not really. Nothing serious. It can all be settled easily enough. But I do have to put in an appearance myself. Dammit!"

I pursed my lips in a pout. "Then you will go today and I will never see you again?"

"No!" he replied, and as he looked at me, I could see his desire to possess me as a collector might wish the possession of some rare *objet d'art.*

Putting a hand under my chin, he lifted my face and gazed at it with lustful admiration. It was not difficult for me to squeeze tears from my eyes as if I were truly distressed at the thought of our parting.

"No," he repeated, seeming to speak as much to himself as to me. "I must have you for my own! Elaine, come with me!"

"To New York?"

He nodded.

"I—I couldn't!"

"Why not?"

"Your reputation—your wife—"

"Oh, God, yes! If I were to take you aboard *The Savage Star* with me, there'd be the devil to pay. That bastard, Ainsley, would use our relationship against me, for certain!"

"Ainsley?" I tried to sound as if I did not recall ever having heard the name before. But my voice trembled as I spoke it.

Hugh thought that it was concern for him causing the tremor of emotion that shook me. He puffed with pride at the flattery he imagined.

"Ainsley's that son of a whore I told you about," he said. "My brother-in-law. He's captain of the ship that I'm sailing on. He'd do anything to get control of my wife's family fortune. If I were to take you onto the ship with me and make an open display of our friendship, he'd find a way to use it against me. He'd turn my wife against me, force her into demanding a divorce or something like that."

He had as good as stated that he clung to his marriage solely because of the fortune he hoped to gain through it. I could not resist prodding him a little. Lowering my lashes, I said coyly, "Would a divorce be so terrible?"

He did not want to admit that he had married from greed.

For a long moment he was uncomfortably silent as he hunted a reply.

He found one. "I do have a child to consider. A lovely little daughter who's very dear to my heart. I have a responsibility to her. I must sacrifice my own happiness for her sake."

I choked back a scornful laugh. The very day before, he had referred callously to his daughter as a *sullen, spoiled brat.* Turning away from him, lest he glimpse something of my true feeling in my face, I said sorrowfully, "Then we must be parted forever?"

"No, dammit, I'll not give you up!" His brow furrowed with the effort of his thoughts.

While he sat engrossed in the problem I had presented him, I slipped the other boot on for him. Again, I caressed his foot first. When I had buckled the boot, I put my hand on his thigh. He covered it with his own hand.

"I shall miss you terribly when you're gone," I said. I was kneeling by his feet. I leaned my cheek against the hand that he rested over mine.

"And I you!" The fingers of his free hand toyed with my hair. I could sense the strength of his desire for me, but I did not fear it. I was aware that the residue of the sleeping powders in him would render him incapable of arousing his passion for some while.

After several moments of deep thought, he spoke up. "My dear, suppose I set you up in a nice little place of your own? A small house in some out-of-the-way corner of the city? Then, whenever business brings me to Savannah, I can visit you there."

"How often would business bring you to Savannah?"

"I—uh—I do spend some time on Savage Key with my mother. And there are other cities I have to visit on company business quite frequently. I—dammit—I might not be able to get there more than three or four times a year!"

I said nothing, letting my silence speak of deep disappointment.

He fell into thought again.

I waited.

"If only I could take you to Savage Key with me," he sighed.

He had come at last to the thought that I had hoped to inspire in him. Putting a wistful tone of longing into my voice, I said, "If only you could!"

Another long moment passed. Then suddenly he lifted my

head again. With his hands against my cheeks, he held my face toward him and looked eagerly into my eyes. "There is a little village on the key! If you were to come live there, then then—" He stopped, leaving the rest unsaid as he realized that he could hardly expect to maintain me as his mistress in the tiny Indian village at the tip of Savage Key.

I held his gaze. Slowly, as if the thought were only then taking form in my mind, I said, "Perhaps I could go to your home on some pretense or another? As a household servant or—oh, Hugh! You said you have a little daughter! Has she a governess? I'm well educated. Perhaps I could go to tutor her! Then we'd be together, you and I, under the same roof!"

His mouth gaped as I spoke. For an instant, hope flared in his eyes. Then it faded and he sighed sadly. "Impossible, I fear. It would never work."

"Why not?"

"You're far too beautiful, my dear. My wife would never accept such a story. She would never believe that I wanted you merely as a governess for Charlotte, and nothing more."

"Oh, wouldn't she?" I squirmed to my feet and looked down at him. "Do you doubt my skills as an actress, Hugh Marlin? Do you think that I couldn't deceive your wife successfully? And everyone else as well?"

"With that body? Those eyes? That face?" He shook his head. "No, my dear, you could never disguise those charms sufficiently."

"No?" I snatched up his cravat from the floor and thrust it at him. "You get dressed. Go back to your hotel and change your clothes and do whatever you must before you sail—"

"Elaine, I didn't mean—I wasn't casting aspersions on your skills as an actress!" He was distressed at the thought that I was trying to send him away. "I only meant that—you're too lovely! You couldn't hide all that beauty! It just wouldn't be possible!"

Lifting a coquettish brow at him, I allowed myself a small laugh. "If I *could*—if I were to succeed in hiding all my charms completely—would you still desire me?"

"Of course!"

"Would you take me to Savage Key with you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then, go! Do what you must at your hotel. But come straight back here as soon as you're done, you hear?"

"Yes—yes, I will, but—," he stammered, befuddled.

I practically shoved him out the door.

As soon as he was gone, I dug into my trunk. I had several theatrical costumes among my belongings. One was a dress I had worn in the part of a household drudge before I had risen from such insignificant roles. It was a hideously dull gray and a very poor fit. It bagged and sagged so terribly that it hid the curves of my body very well.

I brushed my hair, pulling it tightly away from my face and pinning into a severe bun at the nape of my neck. Then I dusted a bit of cornstarch on it at the temples to suggest that it was graying.

I tweezed my brows, adjusting the shape of them. With some very slight smudges of dark makeup carefully placed on my eyelids, I made my eyes appear somewhat close set. A few more smudges well placed under the eyes seemed to add years to my age.

For jewelry, I donned cheap, false, jet mourning beads that were in quite horrible taste.

When I heard Hugh's knock at my door, I assumed a tight-lipped expression, a sneer that suggested eternal disapproval.

Opening the door, I glared at him.

"Oh!" he grunted, taken aback. He had changed his attire, but he could not change himself. His face was still puffy and his eyes were still bleary from the effects of the heavy dose of drugs I had given him the evening before. He had attempted to disguise his sour breath with mint. The resulting mixture of odors was sickening.

I took a sharp step back from him and looked haughtily down my nose.

He blinked several times "Excuse me, Madam. I fear that I must have—I—" He paused, squinting at me. "Elaine?"

Stridently, I said, "You mistake me, sir!"

"Please accept my apologies." He sounded thoroughly perplexed. He kept staring at me. "No! You are Elaine! Aren't you?"

I smiled then.

He laughed, as much with relief as with delight. "By God, you *have* changed! I couldn't—but you —you amaze me!"

"I told you I was an actress," I said in my normal voice. I gestured him into the room, then walked around in a circle to show my disguise to him. I employed a posture and gait that managed to be slump-shouldered, yet stiffly prim.

He laughed again. "Yes, I believe you really might be able

to do it! Lord, what a joke it would be on Henrietta to have you there in the same house!"

"And only you would know the truth that I hide under this sack of a frock," I said enticingly.

He looked at me with such a curious puzzled longing that I knew he was pondering the night he could not recall, wondering about the pleasures he believed himself to have enjoyed but could not savor in memory. He was eager to taste those pleasures again, this time in full awareness of them.

"Yes," he said. "It's perfect! As soon as I finish this damned business in New York, I'll come for you and take you back to Savage Key."

"No!" I blurted.

Startled, he frowned at me. "But you said—you asked me to take you there."

I did not want to travel with him. I wanted to reach Savage Key well ahead of him, if possible, and have some time there while he was absent. If only his difficulties in New York would keep him away long enough, I might even be able to accomplish my goal there before he returned. And that would be a most marvelous joke on Hugh Marlin!

I looked coyly at him. "We must be discreet. You said so yourself. It would look far better—far less suspicious—if we did not arrive together."

"Yes, it would Perhaps—yes—I can give you a letter of introduction and send you on ahead. That should be satisfactory, shouldn't it?"

"That would be perfect," I said with a smile.

PART THREE

25

Again, I assumed a new identity.

The role I had played to convince Hugh Marlin of my ability to disguise the charms of Elaine Leslie would not do for my return to Savage Key. That ill-natured spinster would have been too difficult a character to portray day in and day out and would not have served my purpose at all. She was entirely too unattractive.

I wanted to appear a little plain but not ugly, and I did not want to be dependent on smudges of makeup. I felt that suitable clothing, a severe hairdo, and the change I had already made in the shape of my brows would be disguise enough. After all, the residents of Savage Key had not seen Laura Wickham for five years, during which I had changed from girl to woman. And it was unlikely that any of them had seen the glamourous actress, Elaine Leslie, at all.

The name I chose for my new self was that of my maternal grandmother. I became Lucy Stuart. The clothing with which I outfitted myself before leaving Savannah was appropriate for an impecunious woman of good breeding forced by circumstances to take a position as governess. I bought them ready-made from store shelves. They were poorly cut and rather drab in color, but not so badly fitted as the dress I had worn for Hugh. I employed a suitably designed corset to suppress my voluptuousness. To enhance my disguise, I obtained a pair of property spectacles from the theater. These were fitted with plain glass lenses to be used on stage without impairing the vision of the wearer. I added a few simple, inexpensive items of jewelry to my wardrobe.

Dressed, wearing no makeup at all, with my hair drawn back from my face and pinned in a bun, I found my reflection in the mirror quite satisfactory. I looked serious and scholarly, very businesslike.

Hugh had posted a letter to his mother, advising her that he was sending a governess for little Charlotte. It left Savannah a few days before I did. Hoping it would have arrived by the time I reached Savage Key, I boarded my ship. As it pulled away from the wharf, heading down the Savannah River, I could not help but think of Bram Ainsley.

I remembered our first meeting on board *The Savage*

Queen, and I remembered our meeting on my balcony in Cuba. Most vividly of all, I remembered that night under the oak, when he had mistaken me for Jennifer. I shivered as I recalled the feel of his arms about me and his mouth demanding mine.

I cursed him for the attraction he held for me, and for the ruthless greed that had made him so hateful to me. Of all the difficulties I might face on Savage Key, it was meeting Bram again that I dreaded most.

The vessel I sailed out of Savannah on was a coastal schooner somewhat smaller than *The Savage Queen.* It put in at every little settlement along the coast of Florida. Often there were no docks available to it. Goods would be offloaded into small boats to be taken ashore. On occasion, mule- or ox-drawn wagons were driven into the surf, up to the hubs in water, and the goods shifted from the small boats into them there. At times, the settlements to which these were being delivered were not visible from shipboard but lay inland of the jungles and swamps along the coast.

In south Florida, the schooner's arrival was sometimes watched by Seminole Indians, who clustered together on the beaches in their colorful costumes. They were rather different in appearance from the Spanish Indians I had seen on Savage Key. I was told that the Seminoles were not native to Florida but were mostly descended from the Creeks of Georgia. It was said that most of the native Florida Indians had been killed or stolen as slaves by the early Spanish invaders, or had succumbed to diseases that the Spanish brought with them. The Creek Seminoles, dissenters from their own tribes, had moved into Florida, absorbing remnants of the native tribes and runaway slaves, and had established themselves there. Efforts of the federal government to remove them to the Indian Territories of the West had resulted in two wars and had decimated their number, but had not been conclusive. Although many of the Seminoles had been captured and sent west, others managed to survive, hiding in the Florida swamps. Finally, they had been left to themselves in the vast wetlands known as the Everglades, an area that white men had found totally unfit for their own use.

Observing the Indians from the deck of the schooner, I felt a touch of kinship with them. They had lost their ties with their ancestors and homeland. They had fought for new identity and new life in a strange place. They had faced over-

whelming odds and had survived. At last, they had managed to establish themselves in their own place in the world.

I wondered if I would ever find peace and a place of my own.

Would I ever be free of the thoughts of Bram Ainsley that persisted in haunting me?

Perhaps by meeting him again, by facing him and fighting him and, I hoped, wresting control of the Savage fortune from his grasp, I would be able to exorcise him from my dreams.

Although it was still early in the spring when I sailed south, the rainy season had begun. As our vessel approached Savage Key, a storm was already building over the mainland of Florida. It was clearly visible, a wall of dark, heavy gray rising from the horizon in the east. The winds from the southeast were strong, pushing the storm toward the Gulf.

Wrapped in a light cloak to protect myself against the flung spray and the threatening rain, I stood in the bow of the schooner. My eyes were fixed on the lush green of the mangroves that lined the coast. Anxiously, I hunted sight of Savage Key.

The captain came to my side. He was a pleasant elderly man with a strong southern drawl. It was seldom that he carried passengers aboard his vessel. A female passenger was quite a rarity. He had shown me the utmost courtesy and deference.

Doffing his cap, he pointed ahead and told me, "Yonder be Savage Key, ma'am. I allow we'll have you ashore before that there storm breaks on us."

"I hope so," I said. Despite the impending rains, the sky over the Gulf was marred with only a few white clouds. The sun blazed fiercely. I had to shade my eyes against its glare as I looked at Savage Key. I could make out the Indian village at its southern tip.

"Old Cap'n Savage's house is up the key a piece," the captain said. "I ain't never put in there before. Savage's own vessels fetch all the stores for the place. I don't rightly know the waters close up to the key, but they be dreadful shoal. I hear tell there used to be a channel a time back, but a storm closed it up. Hear tell there used to be pirates run up the channel, hid out up a deep creek in the swamp in the old days No fear of such now, though. Too shoal. I dassn't go in near to shore, but I'll get you landed right enough. Don't you trouble your mind none about that."

He sounded as if he might be reassuring himself as well as me. I eyed the turbulent masses of clouds that were rushing across the mainland toward us. Flashes of lightning were visible within them, and I could hear the faint rumblings of thunder.

"Do you think the storm will be severe?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Ain't no way of telling for sure, though the Indians seem to have a nose for a hurricane. When they start hauling their boats up out the water, I hunts me a safe cove and puts in. This one though,"—he squinted at the clouds—"she looks to me like the plain ol' reg'lar sort of squall, blows up out a clear sky and comes on fierce but passes by quick. I'll close haul and ride her out. Yonder, there's ol' Cap'n Savage's dock."

I could see the little dock thrusting out from shore. And behind it, Savage House, half-hidden among the gnarled, moss-draped oaks. The house seemed to lurk like some predatory beast of the jungle, ready to spring out upon unsuspecting prey. The sight of it sent an icy shudder down my spine.

My confidence suddenly deserted me. Tugging my cloak tightly about me, I considered telling the captain to take me on to some other port. It was not too late for me to give up my foolish ideas of revenge and return to my career in the theater.

But if I turned back now, Hugh Marlin and his mother might succeed in gaining control of the Savage fortune. What evils might Hugh perpetrate once he had secured his grip on the fortune? What would become of his wife and child, once he had no further need of Henrietta's connection with the Savage family? What new corruptions and dissipations would he enjoy? I doubted that I was the only girl he had ever ravaged. How many more innocent young women would suffer at his hands?

And what of Bram Ainsley?

Was Bram any better than Hugh, marrying Captain Savage's daughter in an effort to establish his own claim to a fortune that he had no natural right to? Now Bram was master of *The Savage Star* and sire of a rightful heir to the fortune. Would he be any less callous than Hugh toward his wife and child if he managed to win control of the Savage line? Should he be allowed to enjoy the profits of his ruthless greed?

Anger burned in me as I thought of the way he had lured me from my home in Cuba to use me for his own ends. Had he believed that if I married Wesley Savage he could control

me, and through me, Wesley's inheritance? Was he like Hugh, thinking himself irresistible to women? Had he thought he could master me through the lusts of the body and bend me to his will?

If so, he would learn that he had been sorely mistaken. With a bitter, sardonic smile, I steeled myself to face my future on Savage Key.

Although the sun was still shining above us, the first winds of the storm were whipping up the waves as we hove to off the Savage House landing. Hurriedly, the captain had a dinghy put into the water and had my luggage lowered into it. He had his men hand me down gently but hastily. Almost as soon as I was seated, the oarsman began to pull.

The wind was against us. Despite his effort, the trip from the schooner to the dock was slow. As we approached, people came from the house onto the veranda to watch us. I recognized Pauline and Wesley, but not the servants who followed them. Neither Henrietta nor Jennifer joined them.

Two manservants crossed the beach to meet us on the dock. They helped me from the dinghy, then quickly unloaded my luggage. As soon as my cases were out of it, the small boat started back to the schooner.

A pang of fear stabbed through me as I realized that I no longer had any choice. My course was set and it could not be changed. I could not turn back now, no matter what.

Gathering my skirts, and my courage, I ducked my head against the increasing bluster of the oncoming storm and strode with determination toward Savage House.

Pauline came down the steps to meet me in front of the house. Her face, like her son's, showed the passage of time since I had seen it last.

Her features had grown sharp. Creases from her nostrils to the corners of her mouth gave her a suggestion of a perpetual sneer. Crow's-feet tracked about her eyes, and the skin of her throat was sagging.

I was surprised that her dark hair showed no signs of graying, until I approached close enough to see that it had been dyed.

Her piercing eyes scanned me with curiosity and distrust. It was apparent that she did not approve of my presence on Savage Key. With the aloofness of a superior addressing a menial, she said, "You are the widow, Stuart, I take it?"

"I am." I answered, matching her aloofness in kind. My role was that of a well-educated woman of good background

driven to low estate by unfortunate circumstances. Meeting her critical gaze with cold dignity, I allowed myself the pleasure of saying, "And you are the housekeeper here, I take it?"

She drew herself up with haughty indignation. "I am Mrs. Savage, the mistress of this house!"

Wesley had come down from the veranda to join us. He appeared distressed by the tension. Offering me a rather shy smile of welcome, he said in an apologetic tone, "Please allow me to present myself, Mrs. Stuart. I am Wesley Savage. Your servant, ma'am."

"I am glad to meet you, Mister Savage," I replied.

"We received Mister Marlin's letter advising us that you were coming," he told me.

Pauline grumbled, "It gave us small warning. It came only yesterday."

"Oh dear," I said, keeping my attention on Wesley. "I do hope that my arrival so soon after the news that I was coming will not cause you a great inconvenience!"

"Not at all!" he said eagerly. "We have plenty of room here. A guest is always welcome on Savage Key!"

"Mrs. Stuart is not a *guest* here! She is an *employee!*" Pauline snapped. As she spoke, a shadow fell across us all. The clouds scudding before the storm had reached the sun and covered its face.

Wesley glanced apprehensively at the sky. He seemed disturbed by the approach of the storm. Hastily, he said, "We had best go inside before the rain begins."

As we started up the steps to the veranda, I glimpsed the pale blur of a face jerking back from a parlor window. Someone had been watching us.

Startled, I shivered as I remembered the face at my window that had terrified me so when I was first on Savage Key. This time, I knew it had not been a curious raccoon. Who was it? I wondered. And why spy?

Wesley noticed my shiver. He asked, "Are you cold?" Before I could reply, he answered himself, "Of course you must be! Your cloak's all wet!"

"It's only sea spray. It hasn't soaked through," I told him.

He would not be dissuaded from his solicitude for me. "We must get you dry and warm quickly." He gestured me into the hallway ahead of him. As he followed, he called out, "Nita! Nita, where are you?"

A maid came hurrying from the back of the house. She

was one of the Spanish Indians, but I did not recognize her. She had not been a servant in the house when I was there before.

"Yes, Mister Wesley?" she said.

"Nita, this is Mrs. Stuart, the governess that Mister Marlin sent to educate the children. Show her to the room next to the nursery and help her—"

He was interrupted by Henrietta. She came from the parlor, walking with her shoulders set stiffly and her head held very erect. Her face had a worn, haggard look. Her eyes were deep, filled with something akin to despair.

She glowered at me with what appeared to be intense hatred. "No!"

"What?" Wesley frowned at her.

"I will not have this woman in the house!" she said, almost screaming.

"Henrietta! Be quiet!" Pauline snapped.

"It's bad enough that Hugh's always off amusing himself with women on the mainland or in the village. I will not have him sending them here to reside in my home!" Henrietta declared.

Pauline told her, "You're making a fool of yourself."

"I won't have it! I won't have it!" Henrietta broke into tears of helpless rage. Wheeling, she ran back into the parlor.

I looked at Wesley in question.

Embarrassment burned in his face. He stammered, "I—I'm afraid that my sister is—"

Pauline relieved him of the apology. With a mockery of sweetness, she said, "Poor Henrietta is a very nervous creature. She's been quite distraught of late. I fear that mental disturbance runs in her family. Her father is completely out of his mind."

She made no reference to Wesley but managed to suggest that he, too, was unbalanced. I could see how much her words discomforted him.

"If you'll please excuse me, Mrs. Stuart, Nita will show you to your room," he said. He did not await my leave but hurried away.

With smug satisfaction, Pauline spoke to me as if she offered a confidence. "Wesley and that poor girl are my stepchildren. My husband's offspring by a previous marriage. It pains me that my only son should have taken his bride from such a family. But Hugh is so compassionate that he pitied the poor creature and sacrificed his own happiness for

hers. It is unfortunate that there has been a child of the union. I fear little Charlotte has inherited her mother's weakness. She is a very nervous child. You may find her most difficult to deal with."

I did not believe that Hugh Marlin was capable of even comprehending the nature of compassion, but I kept my thought from showing in my face and I managed to prevent my voice from suggesting scorn as I replied, "Your son is a kind man."

"He is!" she agreed. "Tell me, how did you happen to meet him?"

"Through a mutual acquaintance," I lied with the aplomb of an accomplished actress. "He heard that I was seeking a position in a respectable household and very kindly offered to send me here as governess to his daughter."

"How like the dear boy! Always so thoughtful! So generous!" She was as skilled a liar as I. But then she'd had many more years of practice.

Scanning me again, she observed the hints of physical beauty that my costume did not fully disguise. I was well aware that she suspected Hugh had sent me to Savage Key for purposes of his own having nothing whatever to do with the education of his daughter.

She went on, "His wife is quite possessive. She was very distressed when his letter arrived yesterday. She has a wild, foolish imagination which has led her into all sorts of unfounded fantasies about the people around her. She seems to believe that you will attempt to steal away the affections of—ah—her child."

There was no mistaking her meaning. Shaping an expression of stern indignation, I said, "I have absolutely no intention of doing any such thing!"

She was not convinced, but it was evident that she enjoyed asserting her dominance over Henrietta. "Of course I argued with her. It would hardly seem fair to let you travel all this way, and then send you off without even giving you the opportunity to demonstrate your capabilities in the position."

"I appreciate your consideration, Mrs. Savage," I said.

Having sown the seeds of the thoughts that she wanted to grow in my mind, she looked past me at the maid who stood waiting. "Nita, take Mrs. Stuart upstairs to her quarters. See to it that she is made comfortable."

As I started for the stairs with the maid, Pauline added slyly, "We will try to make you as comfortable as is possible

under the circumstances, Mrs. Stuart. However, I fear you may be disappointed with your stay on Savage Key. We have very few modern conveniences here, and living in such an isolated place, we have very little privacy from one another. You may not find your visit here comfortable at all."

I recognized the threat in her words. She was warning me not to entertain designs on Hugh.

But my designs were not on Hugh at all.

26

The maid, Nita, showed me to a room on the second floor of the house. It was on the same side of the hall as the guest room that I had occupied five years before, and not far distant from it. I was tense with memories as I walked down the hallway. It had the eerie distant familiarity of a half-remembered dream.

The room that was to be mine was small. It was furnished in the usual manner of Savage House, with oddly mixed pieces. The drapes and carpet were dark in color, giving the room a gloomy aspect. Nita drew open the drapes, but no sunlight spilled through the windows to brighten the room. The storm had arrived. Outside, rain cascaded from dull, gray clouds shocked by the flash of lightning and the roar of thunder.

Glancing around the room, I saw an interior door. It was closed. From behind it, I could hear a murmuring of voices. Nita told me that the door connected my room with the nursery.

"Are the children there now?" I asked.

"Yes Dolores, she is look after them."

"Who is Dolores?"

"The maid, like me."

I did not remember a maid named Dolores from my previous visit to Savage Key, nor had I recognized the men who had unloaded my luggage from the dinghy. I wondered if all of the servants who had been employed here before were gone now. It would not have surprised me. Savage House could hardly be a pleasant place to work.

"I think I should like to meet the children now," I said when I had removed my hat and washed my face.

Nita looked surprised. "The ma'am does not want to be rest a while first?"

I shook my head. Although I was weary from my trip, I was far too taut to rest comfortably. And I felt a very strong curiosity about Bram Ainsley's son. I wanted to see the child.

"I had best be at my business," I told her. "I am here as a governess to the children. I would like to meet them."

She went to the connecting door, rapped at it, and called, "Dolores!"

"*Si?*" came the response.

"*La señora Stuart esta aquí. Quiere ver los niños.*"

Nita spoke Cuban Spanish with a charming accent that was not familiar to me.

"*Oh! Si! Un momento! Venimos! Niños, venid!*" The voice that replied had a similar accent. I supposed it must be due to the influence of the Indian tongue their ancestors had spoken.

In a moment, the nursery door opened. The young maid came into my bedroom, herding the children before her.

The girl, Charlotte, advanced boldly, although I could sense reluctance in her. There was an air of challenge about the way she confronted me.

At nine, her features showed promise of developing the same kind of loveliness I had seen, now marred and faded, in her grandmother's face. But her mouth was petulant like her father's. And her eyes were too much like her mother's. They held something of the same dark, haunted quality that could be seen in Henrietta's.

She had grown tall and gawky since I had seen her five years before. The dress she wore was a sack of a frock, made of good gray linen, but badly cut and sewn, without style or grace. It appeared to have been thrown together without care, meant only to cover her nakedness. I wondered if Henrietta had made it for her.

Her stockings sagged in wrinkles about the tops of her scuffed boots. Her hair looked as if she had braided it herself, losing strands from the plaits in the process. There were smears of dirt on her dress, and signs that smudges had been hurriedly wiped from her face before she was brought in to be presented to me.

Bram's son, almost three, clung bashfully to the maid's skirts and peered at me with open curiosity. He did not wear a dress, as was usual for a boy his age, but was already in short pantaloons. Although his little suit was quite plain, without frills or lace, it was obviously well made. If Jennifer had stitched it, she had done so with loving attention.

His face was still baby soft. His mouth was a Cupid's bow, his nose was snubbed, and his cheeks were rosy. His hair was a mass of creamy curls.

His eyes were dark like his father's, but they were completely innocent of such anger and contempt as Bram's always seemed to hold. When they met mine, he smiled guilelessly. My heart melted within me. I could barely re-

strain myself from grabbing him up in my arms and hugging him to me.

"Ma'am Stuart, I am Dolores," the maid said, her accent giving a very pretty lilt to her voice. As she curtsied, she offered me a suggestion of a warm smile. Her pretty young face had a glow to it and her eyes sparkled. She looked as if she were almost bursting with inner happiness.

I had seen such an expression before—long ago—in my own mirror in *Roca Negra*, the night that my betrothal to Don Orlando had been announced. I felt a pang of envy at the thought that I should never know such joyful, naive happiness again.

"This is Miss Charlotte, the daughter of Ma'am Henrietta and Mister Hugh," Dolores said, giving Charlotte a nudge.

The girl bobbed her head in a dutiful greeting that was completely insincere.

"And this is Master Ricky—little Garrick—the son of Ma'am Jennifer and Captain Bram," Dolores continued.

So Bram had named his son after Captain Savage, I thought. It might be only natural to honor a grandfather in that way, but to me, it seemed more like an example of Bram's maneuvering to secure his claim on both the captain's affection and his fortune.

Ricky had apparently been rehearsed for our meeting. As Dolores nudged him, he took a very small step forward. He gazed at me a moment, then looked up at Dolores in question. He had forgotten what he was supposed to do.

Bending to him, she whispered, "Bow to the ma'am, the way your mama is teach you."

His mouth shaped a silent "oh." He looked thoughtfully at me, then executed a charmingly inept bow. Then he clutched Dolores' skirts again and thrust a finger into his mouth.

She slapped his hand lightly. "No, Ricky, is not right to put the hand in the face so."

He drew it away with a pout that turned immediately into a self-conscious giggle.

Dolores smiled apologetically at me. "I try to be teach him the ways as his mama is show to do, but he is forget sometimes. He is not meet the strangers very much. It makes for him the excitement."

"Of course." I returned her smile.

Peevishly, Charlotte demanded of me, "What are you here for?"

She had not been surprised by my arrival. I was certain

that my coming had been explained to her after the receipt of Hugh's letter. Her attitude made it clear to me that she did not relish the idea of my presence.

I replied, "To tutor you."

"Why?"

"So you'll know the things that a young lady needs to know when she grows up."

"What things?"

"Reading and—"

"I can read!" she interrupted.

"Can you?" I lifted my brows at her.

She nodded vigorously.

Dolores said, "Her mama is teach her some from books."

"Can you write?" I asked the child.

Again, she nodded.

"And do sums?"

Another nod.

I was tempted to challenge her with a problem in arithmetic that I knew would be beyond her capacity, but I realized that it would do me no good to antagonize her. I should be trying to win her friendship.

I said, "Can you tell stories?"

Obviously she had never thought of storytelling as a part of her formal education. I could see that I had piqued her interest. On principle, she kept scowling as she replied to me with yet another vigorous nod.

"Do you know the story of the soldier and the tinderbox and the dog with eyes as big as saucers?" I asked.

Her answer was a silent stare that told me she did not.

Ricky spoke up "Tell me! Tell Ricky a story!"

"Shush! Not now!" Dolores said to him. "The ma'am is be tired from the long trip."

He looked so terribly disappointed that I could not bring myself to deny him. "I'm not too tired. I'll be glad to take charge of the children for a while and tell them some stories."

Ricky beamed.

So did Dolores. She thanked me with such gratitude that I suspected she meant to use her free time to visit with the young man who had put such a glow of joy into her face.

Again, I felt a pang of envy.

I had her take the children back into the nursery, while Nita helped me to unpack. Once I had refreshed myself with

a quick sponge bath and a change of clothes, I went in after her.

The nursery was very much like my bedroom, small and somber. Through its windows, I could see the crown of an old oak. I thought that even under the best of circumstances only a little sunlight would filter through the thick branches into the room.

Now the storm was raging outside. Thunder grumbled and cracked, rain battered down onto the roof of the veranda just under the windows, and the branches of the oak whipped in the fierce wind.

Within the nursery, one might have thought it almost the dark of night rather than mid-afternoon. A lamp had been lit and its flame turned high, but it did not succeed in dispelling the murky gloom.

The room never had been properly prepared for service as a nursery. The paper on the walls was of a dull ocher, badly faded, and unrelieved by any kind of picture or other ornamentation. The furniture was like that in the rest of Savage House, ill chosen and mismatched.

The massive bureau looked as if its heavy drawers would be far too cumbersome for a youngster to manage. The commode was too high for a small child to reach the basin without something to stand on. The big tester bed had been made for adult use. And the huge armoire in the corner dominated the room with its looming bulk. Only the toys scattered around suggested that this was a nursery. They were abundant, but most appeared suited to a young boy rather than a girl of nine. I saw no dolls at all.

Lots of toys for Ricky, but few for Charlotte.

Apparently, Bram brought playthings for his son when he stopped at Savage Key, but Hugh gave no thought to his daughter.

It occurred to me that the poor neglected girl was another innocent victim of Hugh Marlin's selfish cruelty. Feeling a sudden sympathy for her, I asked, "Charlotte, what kind of story would you like to hear? Something about princes and princesses?"

"I don't want to hear any stories," she said sullenly.

I replied, "Ricky does."

Ricky was hanging onto my skirt now, as he had clung to Dolores' before. He tugged at it. "Tell Ricky a story!"

"I will." I patted his shoulder.

Pointedly turning her back to me, Charlotte stalked across

the room. She seated herself on the high bed and started to bounce vigorously. The rope webbing that supported the moss-stuffed mattress chafed and creaked.

"You shouldn't do that," I told her. "You might break something."

"I can do whatever I want to in here!" she said. "This is *my* room! *You* don't belong here!"

I tried reasoning with her. "It's Ricky's room, too."

"No, it's not! It's *mine!* It was *my* room before there ever was a Ricky! He only just sleeps here!"

"If he sleeps here, then it must be his room, too. And his bed, too."

"He doesn't sleep in the bed. He sleeps there." She thrust a finger downward, and I saw the little trundle tucked away under the big bed.

Solemnly, Ricky told me, "Sometimes I sleep with Mama. When she's not too sick."

"His mama is always sick!" Charlotte grunted as she continued to bounce. "My mama says she's going to die!"

"No!" Ricky looked imploringly at me. "My mama won't die!"

I scooped him into my arms. He hugged me, pressing his cheek to mine and pleading, "My mama won't die! No, no, no! She won't!"

"She's gonna die! She's gonna die!" Charlotte chanted as she bobbed up and down.

"Charlotte, you stop that!" I snapped at her, appalled by her heartlessness. My sympathy for her forgotten, I thought harshly that she was indeed her father's child.

The sharpness of my order halted both her words and her bouncing. She sat still, glowering at me.

Ricky had begun to cry. I could feel his tears on my cheek as he nestled his face against mine.

I wanted to distract them both and hoped a story might do it. But Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the soldier and the tinderbox, with its witches, saucer-eyed dogs, and near-hanging did not seem appropriate for the moment at all. I wanted something more cheerful. Perhaps one of the charming French folk tales from the collection of Charles Perrault.

I asked, "Do you like the story of Cinderella?"

Ricky didn't reply.

Charlotte looked at me blankly.

"Haven't you ever heard of Cinderella?" I said in surprise.

Charlotte just kept staring.

I felt Ricky roll his head against my cheek in a negative reply.

"Well then, I'll tell it to you right now." Holding him in my arms, I seated myself in the rocking chair by the window. I began to rock gently as I started the story.

Charlotte did not want to admit listening. She idled about the room, keeping her back toward me, picking up toys and putting them down again. But she could not disguise the fact that I had her attention.

Ricky interrupted to ask questions. He did not know what a palace ball was, or even what a princess might be. He was familiar with mice and toads, but not pumpkins or footmen or coaches.

Charlotte was somewhat more knowledgeable in such matters. When Ricky asked about the coach, she answered before I could. I understood that she was showing off her knowledge. For the time being, it didn't matter. The important thing was that she was participating. When Ricky asked his next question, I paused to let her reply.

By the time I reached the climax of the story, she had settled herself on the bed and was openly listening to me.

When I finished the tale of Cinderella, Ricky begged for another. I looked to Charlotte and asked if she would like another story too. Her intended indifference forgotten, she nodded.

I started the tale of Puss in Boots. I had gotten up to the first mention of the ogre and was trying to explain what the unfamiliar word meant without making it too horrible, when a knock sounded at the door.

Supposing it to be Dolores, I called, "Come on in."

The door was opened by Wesley Savage. He did not enter but stood in the doorway, looking quite shy.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you, Mrs. Stuart, but I just ran into Dolores and she told me that you were with the children. Surely, you don't think—I mean—you mustn't feel obligated to begin your work here the instant you arrive. You're most welcome to rest now and start with your duties tomorrow. You must be exhausted after your journey."

"Not at all." I offered him a warm smile. "To tell the truth, I'm finding it very restful sitting here and chatting with the children."

Lifting his brows in surprise, he darted a glance at Charlotte. She was seated quietly on the bed, waiting for me to continue the story.

"They've taken to you quickly," he said to me.

"And I to them."

"I'm glad." He sounded relieved, as if he had expected me to find them a trial. "But are you certain we want you to be happy here, Mrs. Stuart. If there is anything I can do—"

"Thank you, Mister Savage. I do appreciate your kind consideration." Although I spoke with the formally polite propriety of one who was hardly more than a stranger to him, I did put just a trace of feminine coyness into my smile as I replied to Wesley.

He hesitated, as if he could think of nothing more to say, but was reluctant to leave. "Uh—maybe you're hungry? Would you like tea or something?"

My tensions on arriving at Savage Key had deprived me of my natural appetite. I did not feel hungry at all. But I thought it might be a very good idea to let him favor me with this courtesy. "Why, how thoughtful of you, Mister Savage! Yes, I do believe that tea would be refreshing!"

Charlotte jumped up from the bed to protest. "You didn't finish the story!"

Wriggling in my arms, Ricky agreed with her.

I could not resist their pleading. With a shrug, and a smile that asked Wesley's understanding, I said, "Perhaps a little later?"

"Of course," he said, obviously disappointed. Again, he hesitated. Then, hopefully, he suggested, "Perhaps you would like to have tea in here?"

"And cookies?" Ricky asked eagerly.

Since I had already said I would like tea, I felt compelled to accept. "Yes, I would appreciate it if you would have a little something sent up."

"Immediately!" He gave me a bit of a bow and hurried away.

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As Wesley left, I picked up the story I had been telling the children. I was just concluding it when he returned. He was carrying the tea tray himself.

Almost blushing, he stammered, "I—uh—I hope you won't mind if I join you for tea. I mean—the children are here and—uh—it's not as if—"

"Please do," I replied.

Flustered by his own audacity in asking to join a strange woman at tea, he rushed on, apologetically offering an excuse he had evidently rehearsed to himself before he entered the room. "I er—heard a bit of the story you were telling the children. It's one I don't know. I was curious how it comes out."

Ricky lifted his head from my shoulder to tell his uncle, "The ogre turned into a mouse and the puss ate it!"

Charlotte was not willing to let Ricky have the last word. She added, "And the marquis married the princess and they all lived happily ever after!"

"That's good." There was a hint of wistfulness in Wesley's voice. He put the tea tray down on the bureau. As if he were afraid he might have done wrong, he told me, "I brought some cocoa for the children."

"And cookies?" Ricky asked.

"No cookies," Wesley admitted.

Ricky's face fell.

"There weren't any cookies," Wesley explained. "So I brought molasses cakes instead."

"Oh!" Ricky bounded from my lap and hurried over to his uncle. Charlotte lolled indolently on the bed for a moment longer, then rose slowly and, feigning total indifference, strolled after Ricky.

"I don't really know," Wesley said to me. "I fear I've never spent much time around the children. Is it all right for them to have these things?"

Ricky was standing on tiptoe at his side, holding up both hands. They opened and closed eagerly as if the boy waited for a cake to be put into one. Giving a nod toward him, I asked Wesley, "Could you refuse them now?"

He looked down at Ricky and laughed. "No, I suppose not."

The cakes he had brought were small, individual sweets. He put one into Ricky's grasping hand, then held one out to Charlotte.

She frowned at it as if it were somehow defective. Pointing to the tray, she demanded, "I want *that* one!"

Wesley handed her the one she indicated.

"And *that* cocoa!" She pointed imperiously to one of the two cups.

He picked it up and held it out to her. Taking it, she turned her back on him.

"Haven't you been taught yet to say *thank you?*" I said to her.

Aloofly ignoring me, she seated herself on the bed again and bit into the cake.

Wesley gave me a look of abject apology in her behalf.

I assured him, "If a governess weren't needed, I would not be here. I've come to teach them."

He smiled in appreciation.

My words to Charlotte had reminded Ricky of his own training in social behavior. He began chanting, "Thank you! Cocoa? Thank you! Cocoa?"

"Should I give it to him?" Wesley asked me.

"Perhaps I had best handle the cup for him."

"Shall I pour your tea?"

"Yes, please."

He tilted the pot over an empty cup. "Lemon? Sugar?"

"Just a drop of lemon, thank you."

I noticed that his hand trembled a bit as he poured. The cups rattled on their saucers as he brought them and set them down on the table at my side, conveniently within my reach.

Ricky had made a song of his chant. Singing it to himself, he hurried along behind Wesley, his eyes on the cup containing the cocoa. I gestured him into my lap and held the cup for him He clamped both of his hands onto mine as I guided it to his lips.

He drank deeply, sighed with satisfaction, then looked up at me. His mouth was ringed with chocolate. He grinned. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome," I replied.

His grin broadened in appreciation of this properly formal exchange. It was obviously just as he had been taught it should be.

Wesley poured for himself. He set his cup on the table at my side, then pulled a straight chair over next to it and sat down. After taking a sip of tea, he said, "I do hope you will like it here on Savage Key, Mrs. Stuart. You know, we have very few visitors here. The vessels that call are just about our only contact with the outside world. They bring us newspapers and magazines, but very few guests."

"It must be rather lonely for you," I said.

"Very!" The word escaped him in a sigh. He appeared taken aback, as if he had expressed far more depth of feeling than he had meant to. Lifting the cup, he hid behind it as he composed himself.

I pretended to be unaware of his embarrassment. Ricky had finished cramming down the little molasses cake. I gave him another swallow of cocoa, then asked Charlotte, "Is there a towel I can use to wipe Ricky's hands?"

She nodded, but she didn't offer to get it or tell me where it was.

"I get!" Ricky volunteered eagerly. He scrambled from my lap and ran to the commode. He had to use both hands to tug open its door. His fingers left sticky crumbs on the knob. Pulling the towel from the rack inside, he brought it to me.

"Can you wipe your own hands?" I asked him.

He nodded vigorously, scrubbed the towel over them, and showed me a proud chocolate grin.

"And your mouth?" I said.

He applied the towel to his face, smearing it and his cheeks with cocoa.

"Very good. But you've missed a spot." I gestured for him to give me the towel. He handed it over and turned his face up to me.

Charlotte watched silently, her expression of scorn not quite hiding her envy of the attention that the boy was receiving.

As soon as I had gotten the last crumb and smudge of chocolate from his face, Ricky asked, "More cake? More cocoa?"

"No," I told him. "You've had enough for now."

Charlotte took the opportunity to assert herself. She announced, "*I'll* have some more!"

"No," I said.

Defiantly, she went to the tray to help herself.

"Charlotte, you heard Mrs. Stuart," Wesley said to her.

She looked at him in surprise, as if he had never spoken to

her in such a manner before. Her eyes narrowed. Her mouth tightened.

She reached for a cake.

Wesley startled both the girl and himself by slapping her hand away.

It was just a light tap. It certainly couldn't have hurt her. But she leaped back as if it had been a painful blow. For a very long moment, she gazed at him in astonishment. Her face grew pale with anger. Then it reddened as, with visible effort, she squeezed tears into her eyes.

"Mama! Mama!" she screeched, running from the room. "He *hit* me! Uncle Wesley *hit* me!"

"Oh, God!" Wesley groaned. He turned to me with a look of distress. Rising, he set his cup on the table. "Please excuse me, Mrs. Stuart. I didn't mean to—I don't understand—I am not a man of violence."

"I would hardly call such a mild act of discipline *violence*," I told him.

"I'd best—her mother –I shouldn't have. I'm afraid I really know nothing of children. I shouldn't have intruded here. I had no business interfering."

"But you were quite right in what you did," I said. That wasn't exactly true. I would have preferred to try other methods with Charlotte first, before resorting to physical means of dissuading her, but I wanted to soothe Wesley's agitation. "Perhaps it is rather bold of me to say this, Mister Savage, especially since I have been here so short a time and am merely an employee, but it appears to me that your niece is somewhat—ah—spoiled."

He gave an involuntary nod of agreement.

"It would have been a serious error to allow her to go ahead and have her own way after she had been told no," I continued. "Discipline must start somewhere."

"You really believe I did no wrong in striking her?"

"Such a gentle slap should hardly be referred to as *striking* a child, Mister Savage."

"I doubt that her mother would agree with you," he sighed. "I'm afraid you don't know my sister Henrietta at all."

"She'll be angry with you?" I asked.

"I'm certain of it. And the worst is that she will probably hold you to blame. I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Stuart. I think I had best go talk to her. I hope—please—if she does seem

unreasonable at times, please don't take offense. Henrietta's very nervous. Easily upset. She —I—we need you here!"

I understood that he was speaking for himself, rather than in behalf of the children or the rest of the family. He desperately desired the companionship that he hoped my company would provide.

"Don't worry, Mister Savage," I assured him with a gracious smile. "I know that the position of governess is not without its difficulties. I am not easily offended."

"Thank you!"

Wheeling, he started through the doorway. He almost ran into someone about to enter.

I felt my heart jerk within me as I recognized Jennifer Savage—no, now she was Jennifer *Ainsley*. Bram's wife.

"I thought I heard one of the children crying," she said, glancing past him into the nursery. She was wearing a wrapper and slippers, as if she had just risen from bed.

Upset by Charlotte's behavior and the discussion he could not comprehend, Ricky had been huddling against my skirts. At the sight of his mother, he beamed and rushed to her, arms outspread.

"Mama! Mama!"

She stooped to accept his hug affectionately.

Wesley introduced us, then said to her, "I'm afraid I had best go find Henrietta. I think she's going to be angry with me."

"What happened?" Jennifer asked him.

"Charlotte was disobedient and I struck her."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "*You* struck her?"

He nodded. As he started past her, he said, "Jen, should you be up? You seem pale."

"I'm feeling fine," she replied, although she did not appear well at all. The flawlessly smooth skin of her face had a drawn, sallow look to it and there were hollows under her eyes. Her gestures were vague, as if she were fatigued. She did not pick her son up in her arms. I suspected that she did not feel strong enough to lift and hold him.

Leading him by the hand, she came on into the nursery.

Wesley left.

Ricky told his mother, "Mama, the lady's been telling us stories!"

She darted me a friendly smile as she spoke to him. Her tone was very gentle and patient in its criticism. "Ricky, weren't you introduced to Mrs. Stuart."

"Yes, ma'am," he admitted, knowing he had done something wrong.

"Don't you know that you should speak of her by her name?"

Abashed, he prodded at his chin with a pudgy forefinger. "I forgot."

"Do you remember now?"

He nodded vigorously. "Yes, ma'am."

"Then tell me."

"Miz Stuart."

"You won't forget again, will you?"

"No, ma'am." Embarrassed by his lapse of etiquette, he half hid against her skirt and eyed me shyly.

She said to me, "It's difficult for him."

"He's very young," I offered in excuse for the boy.

She nodded. "And he has had so little experience in meeting strangers. When he's old enough, I suppose we ought to send him to a boarding school."

"Ricky don't want to go away," he whined.

"Shush," she told him.

I said, "Perhaps I'll be able to help prepare him for it."

She smiled at me again. It was a warm, friendly smile. "I'm very glad you've come, Mrs. Stuart."

"Miz Stuart," Ricky repeated softly to himself, trying hard to impress the name on his memory.

"I'm afraid that my being here may cause problems." I could hardly suppress a tense quiver in my voice. I felt taut and on edge. My natural instinct was to like Jennifer. She had an amiable charm and obviously wanted to be friends. Yet she was the wife of Bram Ainsley and the mother of his child. Although I despised Bram for his greed and ruthlessness, I could not free myself of my desire for him—and my envy of Jennifer.

"Not at all!" she was saying. "I think your presence here will be very good for —for all of us."

I wondered if she had almost said it would be good for Wesley. Did she see me as a likely friend for him? Was she envisioning me as a prospective bride?

Searching behind her words, looking into her eyes, I sensed some deep, secret concern gnawing away in her mind, some worry that troubled her greatly.

Her grip on her son's hand tightened possessively. She spoke with a slight hesitation, choosing her words with care. "Mrs. Stuart, when my brother-in-law interviewed you for

this position did—did you meet my husband at all?"

"Your husband?" I tried to sound as if I knew nothing whatever of him. My voice almost caught in my throat.

"Captain Bram Ainsley," she told me, obviously proud of Bram and his title. "The master of *The Savage Star*. Did you meet him?"

I shook my head.

"Did Hugh say anything of him?"

"No, not that I recall."

"I was hoping—did Hugh by any chance say anything about when he expected to return here? Did he say he'd be coming back on the *Star*?"

I realized that her deep anxiety concerned Bram. Trying to keep my own sudden concern from my tone, I asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Oh no! It's just that he's been away so much! I only wish—" She paused, then said, "It does get so terribly lonely here without him."

I thought that if I were the wife of a sea captain, I would live on shipboard with him, and even bear my children there, as Captain Savage's first wife had done. I looked askance at Jennifer, and then I realized that she probably had no choice in the matter. She was far too frail for life on shipboard.

Would she have stayed with him if she had been able? I wondered. Would he have wanted her on *The Savage Star?* Or was it only the ship he wanted, and the fortune? Was he glad to be free of his wife while he was at sea?

Suddenly I understood that Jennifer had been asking herself the same questions. *That* was the worry gnawing away at her thoughts.

Composing herself, she told me, "I do hope he comes home soon. I want him to meet you and see what an excellent choice of governess for the children Hugh has made. He does love little Ricky so, you know."

There was a hint of wistfulness in her voice, an unspoken wish that she could be as confident of Bram's love for her as she was of his love for their son. Bending, she hugged the boy tightly, as if looking to him for the affection she so longed for.

"I'll take Ricky to my room with me for a while, Mrs. Stuart," she said. "I'm certain you must be tired."

Ricky waved goodbye to me as she led him from the nursery.

Suddenly I did feel very tired. I drank what was left of my tea, then returned to my bedroom to rest.

28

My duties at Savage House proved to be light. No one gave me any specific instructions concerning them. I was left to decide for myself what I wished to do.

It was customary for Dolores to put the children to bed in the evening, then get them up and dressed in the morning, and give them their breakfast. She cheerfully continued to do so after my arrival.

When I went to take charge of them for the first morning of lessons, I found that Charlotte had been claimed away from me by her mother. Henrietta had retired to her rooms with the girl, leaving orders not to be disturbed.

I wondered if she meant to protect Charlotte against some imaginary violence she had come to fear since Wesley disciplined the girl. Or perhaps since she did not want me on Savage Key, she simply intended to refuse me the opportunity to fulfill the position I had been engaged for.

I had nothing to do that first morning but look after Ricky.

He was too young for formal lessons, and the day was too lovely to be wasted within the dreary confines of that somber nursery, so I took him out onto the beach. There, we amused ourselves by hunting seashells in the sand.

Ricky was an appealing little darling in his suit with its short pantaloons, and his little straw hat tied on with a ribbon under the chin. He took searching for shells very seriously and was delighted when he found a particularly large or colorful one.

The sun was too strong for us to stay in the open very long. We soon retreated to the shade of a palmetto on the berm of the beach. Sitting there, I told him stories.

In turn, he offered to tell me a story. It was a rambling disjointed tale having to do with his father and *The Savage Star*. Evidently, he constructed it from pieces of stories Bram had told to him. It made no sense at all in adult terms, but it displayed Ricky's eager pride and love for his father.

As I listened to him, I was filled with sad yearning. If only the world had been a little different—if only Bram Ainsley had been kind and caring instead of so scornfully ruthless—perhaps this dear child might have been his and mine.

Ricky suddenly halted his story to look past me, wave, and cry, "Charlotte!"

Over my shoulder, I saw the girl walking across the yard from the house toward the woods. She plodded with her head hung and her shoulders slumped, as if she carried a heavy burden of despair.

An instinctive sympathy for her rose in me. I echoed Ricky's shout. "Charlotte!"

She did not look directly at us but stole a quick glance, apparently considering whether to respond or to ignore us.

"Come and join us, Charlotte!" I called. "We're telling stories!"

"About Papa!" Ricky added.

She hesitated indecisively, then came slowly and dispiritedly toward us.

Ricky sensed her mood. His face puckered unhappily. "Charlotte sick?"

She shook her head.

"What's the matter?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she mumbled.

I could see that the tears glistening on her lashes were sincere. Offering her a warm smile, I said, "Come sit down and tell me about it."

She did not come to my side. Suddenly sinking onto her knees, she huddled with her face pressed into her hands. "I don't know! I don't know!"

I moved to her side and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "What is it, dear? What's wrong?"

"I don't know!" she wailed, gasping breath between her words. "I don't know what I do wrong!"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Ricky had followed me to her side. Worried by her behavior, he clutched my arm with one hand. Tentatively, he reached out with the other and patted her head. Very solemnly, he said, "Don't cry, Charlotte!"

"I don't know what I do wrong!" she wailed again. "I don't know why Mama gets mad at me! Why doesn't Mama love me like Aunt Jen loves Ricky? Why doesn't Papa bring me nice things like Uncle Bram brings Ricky? What do I do wrong?"

Gently I tugged at her shoulders, intending to draw her into my arms and console her. At first she resisted. I spoke soothingly to her. And Ricky begged her not to cry. He of-

fered to share the toys his father brought to him if only she wouldn't be unhappy.

After a moment, she yielded to me. With her face pressed to my shoulder, she sobbed and mumbled broken replies to my questions.

I was able to surmise that her mother's treatment of her was totally erratic. Even irrational, I thought. At times, Henrietta would overwhelm the child with shows of affection. Then suddenly, with no cause that Charlotte could fathom, the woman would turn on her daughter and coldly reject her. Charlotte could only assume that in some way beyond her comprehension, she had offended her mother.

In the days that followed, as I gained Charlotte's confidence and observed the other residents of Savage House, I began to understand.

It appeared that Pauline took great pleasure in taunting the children of Captain Savage. Even Jennifer, who was her own child, was subject to this treatment.

With a sweet smile and a saccharine innocence in her voice, Pauline could give a cruel cutting edge to the simplest of comments. Over the years, she had made so many vicious stabs that her victims had become sensitive to the slightest implication from her.

Henrietta seemed to have suffered the most, perhaps because she was married to Hugh. Pauline was so brutal toward her that I suspected the mother-in-law was jealous of the daughter-in-law, even though it was obvious Hugh cared nothing for his wife and was completely devoted to his mother.

Observing Henrietta, I felt that she was aware that Hugh did not love her, but that she somehow managed to keep from openly admitting this truth to herself. She seemed to be in constant internal conflict as she struggled to maintain the fiction of her marriage. Pauline had only to suggest that some act of hers might not meet with Hugh's approval to disturb her deeply. As a result, she spent most of her time brooding in her room. On occasion, she took Charlotte with her, as if she found some comfort in her daughter's company. At other times, she seemed to vent all of her pain and frustrations on the innocent girl.

My arrival had worsened Henrietta's situation. My disguise did not completely hide my feminine attributes. I could sense that the whole family suspected Hugh's motives in sending me to Savage Key. Whether they admitted it or not, they

were all aware of his licentiousness. His visits to the village at the southern tip of the key were scandal among the servants, and his trips to the mainland were subjects for much speculation.

I perceived that Pauline was uncertain about my own part in the matter. She could not decide whether I was a conspirator with her son, or an innocent victim he had lured into his trap. But she did not doubt his intentions, and she definitely disapproved. It was only because my presence had such a disturbing effect on Henrietta that Pauline had allowed me to stay at Savage House.

Pauline dominated Wesley, allowing him no responsibility in any aspect of Savage business except the keeping of the company books. Although with his father incapacitated, Wesley should have been the acting master of the house and the business, Pauline was the one who made all of the decisions. So long as Wesley did not object, she generally ignored him. When he was brash enough to take a question before Captain Savage, she retaliated with biting references to his cowardice.

A few of her well-chosen words could fill him with hopeless despondency over his situation, trapped as he was on Savage Key by his overwhelming fear of the water that surrounded it. When Pauline drove him into such a mood, he hid himself in his study—the one place that was truly his. I thought that perhaps he found solace among the columns of figures in his account books. Of them, at least, he was master.

Captain Savage was confined to his room upstairs, tended by servants. Pauline had issued orders to the family that he was not to be disturbed. Whenever any of his children disobeyed and went to him, she reprimanded the offender with warnings that the least excitement might kill the captain.

Even though he lay helpless in his bed, the captain's presence could be felt throughout the house. His will was as strong as Pauline's. Her constant awareness of him seemed to be the one thing that kept her in check. I was certain that when he died, she would not be satisfied with merely dominating his children. She would strive to destroy them. She would find a way to drive Wesley and Jennifer into madness, just as she was doing to Henrietta.

Of Captain Savage's three children, Jennifer was most her father's child. If she had possessed the strength of constitution to match her will, she might have been able to stand up to Pauline. But her frailty weakened her spirit. As the battering

of the sea wears away even the most solid of rock, so Pauline was managing to erode Jennifer's courage.

The weapon Pauline used against Jennifer was Bram Ainsley. Again and again, she hinted that while he was away from Savage Key, visiting various ports, Bram must undoubtedly be betraying his wife. She never actually made any accusations, but she dropped comments about waterfront sluts and whores. She referred frequently to Bram's sordid beginnings and kept repeating adages about "like breeding like" and "blood always telling."

She had planted the seeds of suspicion that Bram had only married Jennifer to obtain an opportunity at the Savage fortune. She cultivated them with great care. And Jennifer, weakening before Pauline's persistence, desperately awaited the reassurance she hoped to receive from Bram on his return to Savage Key.

My own feelings toward Jennifer continued to be muddled. Knowing that she had slept in Bram's arms and borne his child, I could not keep myself from resenting her almost to the point of hatred. Yet, I pitied her because I was certain that Pauline was right about Bram using Jennifer to further his own ambitions. And I sympathized with her because I knew loneliness so intimately myself.

For Ricky and Charlotte both, I rapidly developed a real fondness. Once Charlotte had accepted me, she turned to me for the sincere affection and comfort she did not receive from her mother. She blossomed quickly under the attention I gave her. Eager to please me, she followed my suggestions about improving her appearance. Her wardrobe offered little to work with, but I soon had her dressing neatly and cleanly, if not stylishly. And at her lessons, she proved an able student.

Ricky was a bright, cheerful child by nature. His mother's love for him was deep and consistent, even if her weak constitution did prevent her from giving him as much of her time as she wished. Sensitive to her mental state and the emotional conflicts in the house about him, he turned to me for security.

We spent hours together each day. In the mornings, Ricky would listen attentively while I gave Charlotte her lessons. The children took an early lunch, then rested a while. After their rest period, we would go to the beach or the fringes of the woods for recreation, until the afternoon rains began to threaten us. When the rain drove us inside, we would retire to the nursery for stories.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the children. My ugly memories and my real reason for being on Savage Key again would fade away as I became engrossed in the pleasures of their play, the delights of watching them learn, and the enchantment of the stories we shared.

A favorite pastime was collecting shells on the beach, then sitting in the shade arranging them in patterns on the sand. One afternoon as we were doing this, I noticed Wesley on the veranda of the house. He was standing watching us with such a lonely longing in his expression that my heart went out to him, as if he were some poor child who had not been invited to take part in a game I was not thinking of plots and plans at all when I called for him to come join us.

He came hesitantly, as if fearful of interrupting the happy rapport that the children and I were sharing. His fear was justified. As he walked toward us, Charlotte's smile turned to a petulant frown.

"I don't want *him* here!" she grumbled.

"Why not?" I asked her.

"He's one of *them*."

"One of who?"

"You know! *Them*!" she replied, not knowing how to define her enemies. She glared at Wesley with overt hostility.

His air apologetic, he said, "I don't want to intrude."

"You aren't intruding!" I told him. "Come see the lovely seashells that the children have gathered."

Ricky pointed proudly at the collection he had spread on the sand. Charlotte started to scoop hers up and hide them possessively in her apron. As she reached for a very colorful little one that I had been admiring just moments before, Wesley said, "That looks like a 'bleeding tooth.' "

Charlotte paused to peer curiously at the shell in her hand. It was a bulging spiral no more than an inch long, streaked with purple on a ground of yellow. The outer lip was pure white. Inside, there was an area of red and a pair of small, white, toothlike protuberances.

"May I see it?" he asked her.

She snapped her hand closed over the shell and eyed him suspiciously. "Why?"

"I'm very interested in shells. I have rather a large collection of them."

"You do?"

He nodded. "From what I saw of that one, it appears to be

a better specimen than the examples of the bleeding tooth that I have in my collection. I would like to examine it."

Defiantly, she shook her head and put the clenched hand that held the shell behind her back.

"Would you like to see Ricky's shells?" I suggested.

Eagerly, Ricky grabbed up one from his collection and thrust it toward Wesley. It was a small, roughly triangular shell of off-white with brownish coloration on the heavy ribs that radiated from the apex to the curving fore-edge.

Taking it, Wesley turned it in his fingers. "This is a 'cat's paw.' "

Ricky giggled.

"It's just an old shell!" Charlotte said.

"I don't mean that it was ever the paw of a real cat. But it does rather resemble one, don't you think?" Wesley held the shell in the palm of his hand, showing it to her.

She glared at the toelike ridges on it, unwilling to admit that Wesley was right.

"Some shells have very interesting names," he continued. He pointed to another of Ricky's collection. "Like that one. It's called a 'turkey wing.' "

Ricky giggled again. Picking up the indicated shell, he studied it carefully and repeated the name as if to commit it to memory. "A turkey wing!"

Then he poked a finger at a thin, dull brown, fan-shaped shell. "What's this called?"

"A 'stiff pen' shell," Wesley said.

Again, Ricky repeated the name. He was fascinated. He went through his entire collection, and Wesley gave him a name for each shell.

Despite herself, Charlotte was interested. She had gathered all of her shells into her apron. Sorting through the hidden collection, she brought out a smooth, white cone covered with spiraled rows of irregular brown figures, and demanded of Wesley, "What's this!"

"An 'alphabet shell.' "

"Let me see!" Ricky reached out for it.

Charlotte scowled at the shell, then threw it on the ground. "That's not the alphabet!"

"Not a real alphabet," Wesley said. "But don't you think it looks like it might be one?"

Ricky snatched up the shell and examined it closely. He had learned a few of his letters. Bobbing his head in agreement with Wesley, he recited the ones he knew.

"They're silly names for silly shells!" Charlotte pronounced.

"I think they're rather imaginative," Wesley replied. He picked up one from Ricky's collection and held it toward her. "For instance, this one is called an 'angel wing.' "

"Let me see!" Ricky asked. Wesley gave it to him.

Wesley was trying hard not to show it, but I could see that Charlotte's attitude was distressing him. I wished there were some way for him to win her acceptance. Hopefully, I said to him, "Perhaps you'd show us your collection?"

"I'd be delighted." He smiled.

"Now?" Ricky asked eagerly.

"Now," Wesley agreed.

Charlotte pouted as she trailed us back to the house. Wesley took us into the library. He had a number of collections of various objects there. Glass-fronted cases and cabinet drawers were filled with shells, prehistoric fossils, nature specimens, and Indian artifacts, all neatly arranged and tagged. He told us that all of them had either been collected right there on Savage Key or brought in to him by Indians from the surrounding area.

Then he showed us books with finely detailed plates, some hand colored, illustrating plants and shells and creatures unknown to Florida.

Ricky could not understand much of what Wesley said, but he was intrigued by the curious objects and pictures. Charlotte was able to comprehend far more than he. Her petulant anger dissolved as her interest increased. The tone of her questions changed from challenge to a sincere desire for knowledge. Wesley happily answered every question.

I was fascinated both by the subjects and by Wesley's enthusiasm for them. He became almost another person as he spoke of these things he cared for so much. He was no longer shy and hesitant. His eyes sparkled. His voice and gestures were animated. He told us anecdotes about various animals and curios, and we all laughed merrily together.

Before we knew it, the afternoon had passed, and Dolores was hunting the children to give them their supper.

The following afternoon, Wesley again joined us on the beach. This time Charlotte showed no resentment of his presence.

When the rains drove us in to the nursery for our usual session of storytelling, Wesley went with us and told a story himself.

Within a few days, Charlotte began to welcome him into our group.

One afternoon, when he was late in joining us on the beach, I realized that I was becoming quite fond of him. Fond in exactly the same way that I was fond of the children. In many ways, he was very much like a child, a gentle, vulnerable child who had been very lonely and had suffered very much in the hostile environment of Savage Key.

And he obviously was developing a strong affection for me. I sensed that his attitude toward me was mixed. He had the normal desire of a man for a woman to be his mate, and he desperately needed the intellectual companionship that I offered. At the same time, he seemed almost to look upon me as a kind of substitute for the mother that he had lost when he was very young.

When I showed an interest in the business operations of The Savage Line, he even began to consult me about various problems, and to ask my advice.

I thought it would take only a little encouragement on my part to carry him past the remaining vestiges of his shyness into a proposal of marriage. That was what I had come to Savage Key for. By becoming Wesley Savage's wife, I would be able to assert control over the family fortune. I would be in a strong position to fight Pauline and Hugh, to deprive them of the wealth that was their foremost goal in life. And I would be able to use my influence against Bram Ainsley, to prevent him from grasping the power and position his ambition had driven him toward.

And perhaps I would be able to exorcise him from my dreams.

Yet, I hesitated. For reasons that I could not fathom, I withheld the particular encouragement that Wesley needed to overcome his lack of self-esteem and give voice to the desire that I could see in his eyes.

As I lay abed at night, not yet asleep, I would ponder my reluctance. I wanted revenge against Hugh and Pauline, and against Bram Ainsley. I did not doubt that Wesley would make a gentle, loving husband whom I would be able to control easily. I had no hope of ever finding the kind of true love and happiness I once had dreamed of. There seemed to be no reason at all why I shouldn't entice Wesley into a proposal of marriage as quickly as possible. After all, that was my purpose in being on Savage Key. And the longer I postponed it,

the more possibility there was of some obstacle arising to interfere with my plans.

Before drifting into sleep, I would resolve to take action the following day. Then I would dream. Strange, troublesome dreams filled with joy and horror. And in the morning I would decide to wait one more day before I took that final step toward marriage to Wesley Savage.

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It was afternoon, and the rain had begun, driving us in from the beach. We sat together, Wesley and the children and I, in the gloomy little nursery, trying to brighten it with storytelling, while a steady drizzle fell on the veranda roof just below the windows.

Ricky was cuddled on my lap. He half drowsed, despite his efforts to hear all of the story that I was telling Charlotte lolled on the bed, listening with lazy interest. Wesley watched me as if totally engrossed in the tale. I was certain that he was not at all aware of the revealing expression of infatuation on his face.

As I recounted a tale I had learned in my own childhood, a part of my mind was considering my plan to marry Wesley. I knew that I should not procrastinate any longer. If I wished to have the matter settled before Hugh returned to Savage Key, I had best act quickly.

I told myself that it would be this evening, when the rain had ended and the sun was setting in a magnificent display of color, or perhaps after the moon had risen and the sky was vital with the sparkling brilliance of the stars.

Yes, I decided. This evening I would lead Wesley into a proposal of marriage.

My thoughts and my story were suddenly interrupted by sounds of excitement from within the house.

Wesley and I looked at each other in question. He rose to go see what was happening. He had been gone only a few minutes when Dolores came running into the nursery, all aflurry.

"The ship comes!" she announced. "I dress the children now, *si?* In the nice things for to meet the papas!"

"Papa!" Ricky screeched joyfully. Fully awakened by the news, he leaped from my lap and ran to Dolores. "Papa's ship! Papa's ship!"

My heart stopped for an instant, cramping in my breast. Then it began to pound wildly. The ship would be bringing both Bram and Hugh to Savage Key. The moment of confrontation was arriving and I wasn't ready for it. Not yet. I should have had Wesley's proposal, perhaps even his vows, by this time. But I had delayed and now—

I knew what Hugh would be expecting of me. My very being cringed at the thought. What could I do?

"Will you finish the story later, Mrs. Stuart?" Charlotte was asking of me. She showed no enthusiasm for her father's return. Her voice had a weary sighing sound to it, as if his arrival were no more than a nuisance to be borne by her.

"Yes, of course," I muttered distractedly. "Later. Yes. Later."

Leaving Dolores to tend the children, I hurried into my own room. At the mirror, I studied my disguise.

Would Bram recognize me? I wondered.

With a sharp bitterness, I asked myself why he should. I had been nothing to him, simply an object to be used and abandoned. If it had not fallen to Hugh to rape me and leave me for dead, I supposed Bram would have accepted the task. And then have forgotten me as completely as Hugh apparently had.

My mind was a jumble. I hadn't managed to collect my thoughts yet when Wesley came to my door to tell me that *The Savage Star* was offshore, and to ask if I wanted to go down and meet the small boat that would be bringing Bram and Hugh to the dock.

I knew that I would have to face them both sooner or later. But not yet! Not yet! I couldn't!

"I—I have a terrible headache," I told him.

His look of sympathy was painfully intense. "Can I get something for you? A powder, perhaps? Pauline keeps sleeping powders and other remedies –"

"No, I'll be all right. I just don't feel like meeting anyone now. Tomorrow, perhaps."

"Bram will probably be leaving in the morning when the tide turns," he told me. "That's Bram Ainsley, Ricky's father. I'm certain he'll want to meet you. He really cares so much for Ricky. It's a shame he can't stay here more of the time."

It seemed very strange to me that Wesley should show so much respect and actual friendship toward Bram Ainsley. I remembered that he had once told me Bram was what his father had wanted him to be. It was evident that he did envy Bram, but he showed no sign at all of jealous rancor. Nor did he seem to recognize the cruel ruthlessness that I saw in Bram. I thought it odd that someone as sensitive as Wesley could not see that Bram had tricked and deluded both Captain Savage and Jennifer for his own ambitious purposes.

In my agitation, I was tempted to speak out and warn

Wesley that his loyalty was terribly misplaced. But to so much as admit that I had ever met Bram Ainsley before would betray the role I played. I stammered, "P—perhaps tomorrow I'll meet him, before he leaves."

"The tide will be turning early. Are you sure I can't bring you something for your headache? Some tea?"

"No. Please. I just want to rest awhile."

He left reluctantly.

I listened to his footsteps as he descended the stairs, and to the sounds of Dolores herding the freshly washed and dressed children from the nursery. I could hear Jennifer leave her room to go down and meet her husband.

When I was certain they were all downstairs and no one would see me, I left my room.

The unoccupied front bedroom in which I had stayed during my first visit to Savage Key overlooked the beach. I hesitated at the door as a flood of memories rushed through my mind.

My hand trembled as I turned the knob.

Inside the bedroom, the drapes were drawn. The room was musty and dark. I clutched my skirts tightly as I made my way to a window. It was the same window through which I had seen those eyes that terrible night. The eyes of a raccoon, Wesley had said But the maid had been certain that they were the ghostly eyes of the accursed pirate captain's restless spirit.

As I touched the heavy plush drape to pull it aside and look out, I felt as if I were opening a coffin.

The fine drizzle of rain pattered on the window glass, blurring the world beyond. Under the low, gray sky, the Gulf was the color of weathered lead. *The Savage Star* bobbed at anchor on the wind-churned waves.

The dinghy was already in the water, and the luggage loaded. The oarsman was just taking his place. Two men wrapped in oilskins followed him down from the deck of the steamer.

It was easy to tell which was Bram and which was Hugh. Each one's manner was quite different. Hugh took the utmost care as he stepped down the Jacob's ladder. Bram swung down with casual masculine grace, hardly seeming to need the ladder at all.

My body remembered the feel of his strong hands on my wrists as he lifted me from my balcony to the roof of the hacienda of Don Pedro so long ago in Cuba. It remembered

the feel of his muscular arms about me on the deck of *The Savage Queen* that same night. My mouth burned with the memory of his lips on mine, fierce and demanding.

The conflicting fears and desires in me drew me so taut that I felt almost ill as I watched the dinghy pull toward the dock.

Two manservants, cloaked against the rain, met the boat. I could see no one else. I supposed that the members of the family were waiting on the veranda, out of the weather.

Suddenly I saw someone come running from the veranda into the yard, dashing toward the dock. I recognized Jennifer, hurrying to meet her husband, without even a scarf to cover her head or a shawl to protect her shoulders.

Resentment seared acidly in my throat. It should have been different! Bram should have been kind and loving instead of ruthlessly ambitious, and I should have been the wife running so eagerly to his arms.

I could hear Wesley shouting for Jennifer to come back to the shelter of the veranda. She paid no attention to him. He ran after her, but she reached the edge of the beach well ahead of him. He halted there, held back from pursuing her further by his overwhelming fear of the water. His shoulders slumped in defeat, and I could imagine the dismay and self-loathing that he must have felt.

As the dinghy reached the dock, Bram bounded from it. A few long, fast strides took him to Jennifer. He grabbed her into his arms.

A sharp spear of jealousy wrenched through me.

Bram bent his face close to hers. I thought I could not bear to watch him kiss her, yet I was unable to turn away. I stood as if transfixed.

Her head lolled back. She went limp in his arms. She appeared to have fainted. He scooped her up. Carrying her frail body with ease, he dashed toward the house.

As people entered the hallway below, I could hear the murmur of their voices.

It occurred to me that Bram might bring his wife directly to her bedroom. Her room was across the hall from the one in which I was standing. I did not want to be discovered in the unoccupied room. It would be quite difficult for me to explain my presence there, if I were called upon to do so. Nor did I want to be found absent from my own room after I had told Wesley I needed rest because of a terrible headache.

Breathlessly, I darted through the hall. I could hear the ur-

gent pounding of boots in the hallway below, and then upon the stairs. Bram, with his wife in his arms, I thought bitterly, as I flung myself into my bedroom and shut the door quickly behind me.

My heart hammering, I leaned against the door. Through its panels, I could hear him hurry past. Then came the clatter of other feet and the babble of voices as the others followed. Among the voices, I made out Pauline's. She was commenting that it had been very foolish of Jennifer to expose herself to the inclement weather in such a rash manner, and for no better reason that she'd had.

I wondered if Jennifer would have felt impelled to run so frantically into her husband's arms if Pauline had not filled her head with such doubts of his love for her.

While they were in the hallway, I did not dare move or even breathe, lest the sound should carry and attract someone's attention to me. When, at last, I could hear them no more, I gasped breath into my cramped, aching lungs and latched the door. Then I threw myself across my bed. Pressing my face into my pillow, I struggled against the tears that tried to escape my eyes.

I failed.

I had finally exhausted my sobs and really was suffering from a headache, when Wesley came knocking at my door, asking how I felt. He was so tenderly sincere in his concern that I knew it would be easy to elicit a proposal of marriage from him then and there. And I knew it might well be my last chance to do so before I was confronted by Hugh Marlin.

Still, I could not bring myself to encourage Wesley. I didn't even want to speak to him. A part of me wished desperately that I had never returned to Savage Key at all.

If only I had put aside my craving for revenge and concentrated on my career in the theater, I might have someday succeeded in forgetting Bram Ainsley, I thought. Perhaps I might even have found contentment, if not true happiness.

But I had come to Savage Key. I had chosen a role, and I would have to continue to play it. I would have to carry through my plan and become Wesley Savage's bride.

But not yet! Not yet!

Wesley begged me to let him bring me a powder for my headache. I refused. He offered to get a herbal treatment from one of the Indians. Again, I refused. He asked if he might bring up some supper for me. I insisted that I wanted

nothing and doubted if I would feel like eating at all that evening.

At last, he left me alone.

A little later Dolores looked in on me. I told her that I did not want or need anything, so she went on to attend to the children.

I was interrupted once more that dreadful night. It was quite late. The household had retired. The house was silent, except for those small creakings and groanings common to old lumber, and the eternal chittering of the insects. I had my windows open, hoping for some hint of a cooling breeze. I could hear the rolling of the surf. Lying abed, but far from asleep, I listened to the small sounds of the night.

There were distant splashings in the water, perhaps fish jumping or alligators hunting or any number of other night creatures. A screech owl called in that eerie way that some people said predicted a death. The mosquitoes hummed around the netting that draped my bed, searching for a way in to feast on my warm blood.

Then I heard footsteps.

They were soft, surreptitious paddings, as of someone sneaking through the hall. I lay taut, studying them.

A clink of glass on glass.

The steps stopped outside my door.

My heart seemed to stop within my breast.

The knock was almost inaudible. If I had been sleeping, it would not have awakened me. But I was alert, my nerves sensitive with tension. I started violently at the slight tapping.

When I sat up in bed and drew aside the mosquito bar, I could see just the faintest line of light at the bottom of the door.

This time, at least, he was not bursting in on me totally without warning while I lay drugged, I thought bleakly as I rose and pulled on my wrapper.

The moon glow filtering through my window was sufficient to show me the way to the door. Trembling, wishing desperately for some alternative, and certain there was none, I drew the bolt.

As I had expected, it was Hugh Marlin who waited at my door. He held a candlestick in one hand. In the other, he contrived to carry a pair of brandy glasses and a bottle. His leering smile of greeting, demoniacal by the light of the candle flame, told me he had hoped to repeat the night of joy

that he could not remember having had with me in Savannah.

He had already sampled the brandy. I could smell it on his breath as he leaned forward and whispered, "Shush, my love! They're still awake down the hall!"

"What? Who?" I stammered as he pushed past me into the bedroom.

"That bastard Ainsley. He's sitting up with his wife. Damned nuisance, if you ask me." He went to the dresser to set down the glasses and bottle. "Are you ready, my dear? Ready and eager and waiting? I suppose it's been hard on you, having to wait so long for me! Damned mess in New York was worse than I'd expected. You have no idea what I've been through!"

I had to call upon every modicum of acting ability that I possessed to maintain my composure. My whole being was filled with loathing for him. It was not difficult for me to appear distraught. It was almost impossible to keep from screaming. My voice kept catching in my throat as I said, "Oh, Hugh, my darling! It's—I—you've come at the wrong time!"

He was in his shirtsleeves, all excess clothing such as vest and collar left behind. He had begun to unbutton his shirt. Halting, he frowned at me. "The wrong time?"

"I fear that tonight—of all nights!—I am *indisposed!*"

Whatever else he might be, he was fastidious. His frown turned to a pouting scowl. Softly, but with passionate anger, he said through his teeth. "Damn! Damn you women and your monthly *indispositions!*"

"Hugh, dearest, you know that a woman doesn't wish for times like this! It's a curse!" I entwined my fingers and turned my eyes downward in a pose of contrition. "I'm sorry! You know that!"

"Damn!" he said again. He gazed at me, then suddenly grabbed me. As he jerked my body against his, I could feel the pulsing of his lust. For a horrified moment, I thought that his passion had overwhelmed his fastidiousness. My head spun as if I might faint. And the terror of being raped while unconscious shuddered through me. But as his face neared mine, he breathed, "At least I can taste your sweet kisses!"

The words were but small reassurance. I doubted that he was strong-willed enough to take only my mouth, then stop. As his lips pressed onto mine, I squirmed in revulsion and fear. I was unable to maintain the role I meant to play. I

could not bring myself to respond to his demands but struggled to break free of his embrace.

He lifted his head to ask sharply, "What the devil's the matter with you?"

"I—I told you! Indisposition! Cramps—pains—my head aches—I feel ill!"

He jerked back from me. Rubbing himself with his hands, he growled, "Damn! How much longer, dammit?!"

"Four or five days," I said faintly.

"Damn!" He glared at me with such anger that I cringed. Swallowing at the lump in my throat, I tried desperately to collect myself and play my part. I managed to stammer, "B—but then, Hugh darling, then—"

I left the rest unsaid.

He sighed as if a promise were a poor substitute for performance.

"I suppose I'll just have to make do with that damned icicle I had the misfortune to marry," he grumbled. Taking his candle, his bottle, and the glasses, he left.

Weak with relief, I staggered to the door and bolted it behind him. I had gained a few days! In those days I could certainly have Wesley's proposal. I swore to myself that I would not change my mind in the morning this time. I could afford to procrastinate no longer. Tomorrow, I must take action.

I slept but little, and fitfully, that night.

As if nature herself were in sympathy with the turbulence of my emotions, a night storm broke over Savage Key. It came suddenly, in a raging downpour accompanied by gusting winds and violent crashes of thunder. Flares of lightning beyond my windows momentarily filled my room with harsh, glaring light. The storm seemed to echo my emotions. I felt racked with an internal tempest even fiercer than that outside my windows.

For a while, I was worried that the storm might last into the morning and prevent Bram from taking *The Savage Star* out on the turning tide. I tried to reassure myself with the recollection of Captain Savage telling me that the steamer would not be stayed by adverse weather. Still, I fretted as the storm raged.

When I finally slumbered, my dreams were as troubled as my waking thoughts had been. Throughout them, I kept seeing Bram Ainsley gazing at me with accusation and contempt flashing in his eyes as furiously as the lightning of the storm.

30

In the early summer, morning rains were not common on Savage Key. Usually, I awoke to the glow of a bright sun beaming outside my windows and the sounds of myriad birds chattering in the trees. But this day was dark. Outside, the storm still raged.

During the night, I had been forced to get up and close my windows against the battering rain. By morning, my room had become almost unbearably stuffy. The hot, humid air was oppressively thick. No birds could be heard singing over the noise of the rain pounding on the roof of the veranda below the windows, the thrashing of the old oaks' branches in the wind, and the rumblings of the thunder. Nothing offered solace for the dismal day, or for my thoughts.

Again, I suffered fear that perhaps *The Savage Star* might ride out the storm at anchor, and that Bram Ainsley might remain in Savage House. I lingered in my bedroom, afraid that if I left it, I might encounter him. I missed breakfast. Dolores came to inquire about me. I told her that my head still ached and asked that she look after the children until I felt better.

Wesley came. His sincere concern, which should have touched me, only exasperated me. I was by no means in a suitable state of mind to deal with him yet. I had to gather my wits and be assured that I need not worry about meeting Bram, before I could endure playing out my role with Wesley.

Once I was alone again, I waited in my room, listening to the sounds of the household. When I was positive that it was late enough for the tide to have turned and that the hallway was empty, I edged open my door. Confirming that no one would see me, I crept to the front bedroom.

There, tense with anticipation of what I might see, I peeked through the drapes at the Gulf.

It was capped with white, the water appearing angry and gray under the lash of wind and rain. The sky was a low, grim mass of clouds, barren of gulls and pelicans. The distant horizon was murky, the gray sea and gray sky blending almost imperceptibly.

Through the rain, I could see *The Savage Star* as a blur. It was far from shore, steaming toward New Orleans.

Relief surged through me at the thought that I had managed to avoid facing Bram Ainsley for the time being. But I felt a sense of loss and longing as well. Cursing myself for this weakness, I tried to put him from my mind.

In my room again, I prepared for the morning ahead. I was reasonably certain that I would not have any trouble with Hugh for the time being. At least not during the day, with all the family and servants about the house.

I selected my clothing carefully. I wanted to make myself appealing to Wesley, but I did not want to draw Pauline's wary attention to a sudden change in my appearance or to give Henrietta the impression that I might be trying to attract her husband away from her.

It was too hot for a suit or a many-layered dress. I chose a simple draped skirt of pearl gray gabardine trimmed with bands of darker gray ruchings, and a tucked shirtwaist of white muslin with delicate ruffles at the neck. My parure consisted of earrings and a brooch of nickel silver set with Bohemian garnets.

I studied myself in the mirror before I put up my hair. My fretful night had left my face rather drawn. There were suggestions of hollows under my eyes. A coif less severe than the stark bun I had been wearing in my role as governess would have made me appear less haggard. But it might also have attracted suspicion. So I pulled all traces of the natural wave from my tresses and pinned them back in the usual tight knot.

Adding the wire-rimmed stage spectacles, I surveyed myself in my costume. The results of my careful choices were not exactly flattering, but neither were they totally unattractive.

Satisfied, my mind turning to the approach that I would take to elicit Wesley's proposal of marriage, I stepped from my room.

And almost walked into Bram Ainsley!

For an instant that seemed an eternity, I stood as if in a trance before him. My mind churned. It denied his presence. He could not possibly be facing me in Savage House now! He had sailed on the steamer! I had seen his ship leaving!

But he was there, just inches from me.

He stared at me, his brow creasing into a frown.

His thick, ivory blond hair was tousled. A slight stubble of

pale beard on his jaw blurred its harsh planes. His face was tanned by the sun, and the winds had etched fine creases at the corners of his eyes. His features seemed sharper and harder than they had when I last saw him.

He was without coat or vest. His shirt, of a light blue fabric, was rumpled and sweat-stained, as if he had worn it through the night. He appeared strained and weary, as if he had enjoyed but little sleep, if any at all.

I was terribly aware of the scents that clung to him, the tang of the sea and the steamer. And the intense aura of his masculinity.

My body quivered at the nearness of him.

From the multitude of shattered thoughts that tumbled through my mind, one alone was clear to me.

I had to escape his presence!

With effort, I forced my suddenly leaden limbs to move. Keeping my head turned away, I tried to brush past him.

He sidestepped, blocking me. His frown deepened. "Who are you?"

"The governess!" My voice almost broke. My heart was hammering so fiercely it seemed about to burst. I could hardly draw breath.

Desperately, I tried to shove past him.

He caught me by the shoulder.

I winced at his touch, as if his hand were a flame burning into my flesh. I felt it sparking fire in my blood. My body wanted to melt against his.

Holding me, he put his fingers under my chin and forced me to lift my face. I met his eyes. The wire and window glass of my stage spectacles provided no barrier to his probing gaze.

"Laura!" he said, astonished. "Laura Wickham!"

I gave a small shake of my head, but I knew that denial was useless. He had penetrated my disguise and had no doubts about my identity.

His tone was bewildered. "But you drowned!"

Those words sent a pain wrenching through me that was more terrible than any I had ever felt before They seemed to me to be as good as a confession that he had known of Hugh Marlin's attempt to murder me.

The only defense I could find against the pain was anger. Haughtily, I snapped, "I've returned from my watery grave!"

"How? What happened? What—what are you doing here, now, like this?"

"Captain Savage wanted me here! Don't you remember, *Rat?*"

At my scorn, the burning contempt that I had seen so often in my dreams flared in his eyes.

I went on, "He wanted me to marry Wesley. Surely you must remember that! You kidnapped me for him!"

"*Kidnapped!*" He seemed shocked by my choice of words.

The tap of footsteps on the stairs startled me into silence. Someone was coming up.

I could not face anyone else. Not then—there—with Bram standing before me, knowing my true identity.

I whirled in panic, breaking away from the hand he had on my shoulder. As I darted for my room, he strode after me. I could not close the door against him. He was immediately behind me. Inside the room with me.

He shut the door, putting his back to it. We stood motionless, listening to the footsteps. They reached the top of the stairs and went on down the hall. I could hear a door open and close.

Then silence.

Bram gazed at me.

The silence became thick and tangible. It pressed in on me, seeming a challenge to me. I felt that if I spoke first, somehow I would be giving him mastery of the situation. I was determined not to yield to him. I answered his demanding eyes with unspoken defiance.

There was a sheen of sweat on his face. He wiped at his upper lip. Tautly, he spoke. "You came here to marry Wesley?"

I nodded.

"What happened with that popinjay you were planning to marry in Cuba? That Don Orlando Garcia y Dobles of yours?"

I was surprised that he remembered my engagement to Don Orlando. I would have expected him to consider my personal concerns too trivial for his attention. Drawing myself up haughtily, I said with bitter arrogance, "I found that he wasn't worthy of me!"

Again, contempt blazed in Bram's eyes. A muscle jerked spasmodically at a corner of his jaw. He drew a long, slow breath and let it out before he spoke again. "Captain Savage didn't tell me that you'd come back."

"The captain is old and sick," I replied. The calmness of

my tone and steadiness of my voice surprised me. Inside, my every fiber quivered.

"He was lucid enough when I talked to him last night. We talked at great length about a great many things. It's strange that he didn't mention you to me." He paused, his eyes searching my face. "He doesn't know that you're here, does he?"

I glared at him defiantly.

He took a lunging step toward me. Grabbing me by the arm, he demanded, "What are you up to? Is this some damned scheme of Pauline's?"

"Can you really believe that?" I said huskily. His touch was disturbing. Enthralling. My skin seemed intensely sensitive. My blood pulsed with fire. I was being overwhelmed by the aura of his maleness, by the mysterious quality of him that had haunted me through the years. My head spun. All my defensive thoughts about his ruthlessness and ambition and cruelty were fading as desire for him possessed me.

"I don't know what to believe," he murmured.

My face was upturned toward his. He looked into my eyes. I could feel his fingers trembling against my soft flesh.

I had no will. I was aware of nothing but my longing need and his marvelous nearness. My lips parted. My mouth invited his.

"I don't know what to believe," he repeated, his voice soft and distracted. His face bent toward mine.

My eyes closed. I shuddered in anticipation.

Fiercely, passionately, his mouth took mine. His arms slipped around my body. My hands found his shoulders and crept about his neck. I clung to him as he drew me tightly against him. I could feel the throbbing of his need, as intense as my own. I answered fire with fire, my mouth hot against his.

His hands kneaded at my back, working slowly downward, finding firm responsive flesh. He drew me closer and closer yet, as if we might merge into one being.

When his lips lifted from mine, he breathed my name like the sighing of the wind.

"Bram!" I moaned.

The sudden slam of a door was like the crash of thunder from a cloudless sky. I winced in his arms. And felt him wince.

We heard the ominous sound of running in the hallway. A voice cried out. It was Henrietta's. She shouted for Bram.

We tensed in each others' arms. Neither of us drew breath.

"Where are you?" Henrietta cried urgently. "Bram Ainsley, where are you? It's Jennifer! Come quickly! She needs you!"

He jerked away from me. For an instant, he paused as if torn by an intense internal struggle. Then he reached for the knob of the door.

"No!" I whispered frantically, thinking of Henrietta there in the hall. I did not doubt what she would surmise if she saw him come from my room.

"Where are you!" she wailed. "Jennifer's convulsive! She needs you!"

He darted a look at me that raged with anger and anguish.

Slamming open the door, he dashed out.

To his wife.

31

My hair was disheveled, my clothing disarranged and my soul in turmoil. I had never before known such burning desire as I had experienced in Bram Ainsley's arms. I realized that, had we not been interrupted, I would have succumbed completely to his will.

I loathed myself for the emotions that had overwhelmed me when he embraced me.

Again and again, I asked myself how I could possibly have yielded as I had to a man whose eyes held such contempt when he looked at me. A man who, I was now certain, had knowing allowed Hugh Marlin to abduct me and assault me and almost murder me.

I swore that I would never again let my wild impulses master me. I would make myself as unfeeling, as ruthless, as cruel as he! I would fight him and I would destroy him!

It took a long time for me to regain sufficient composure to leave my room. When at last I felt capable of facing the others, I tucked up the loose strands of my hair, straightened my clothing, and prepared to go find Wesley. I was determined that I would have his proposal of marriage as quickly as I could.

To my surprise, Henrietta was still in the hallway when I stepped from my room. I realized that she had been lurking there, watching my door, ever since Bram had emerged from the room.

She approached me with a sneer. "I thought Hugh sent you here to be his whore! Now it would appear that you're Bram Ainsley's bitch, too!"

Once before I had been called *bitch*. Long ago, under the old oak just outside, when Bram had mistaken me for Jennifer. He had kissed me, then cursed me.

I winced at the slap of Henrietta's words. My face felt aflame, but from embarrassment and anger. And a sense of guilt, as if she were right.

"You're mad!" I said.

"Am I?" Her eyes glittered like icy, black stones set into her pallid face. "Do you think that I'm blind, too? Do you really think that I haven't noticed that lush body of yours under the plain clothes you wear? Do you think I didn't know

instantly why Hugh was sending you here? I knew, even before I ever laid eyes on you! *Governess!* Hah! Hugh never gave enough of a damn about his daughter to bring her a penny toy! Hire a governess for her? Oh, no! Not Hugh! He had to have other reasons! You think you can take him away from me, don't you? Just you wait until he hears about *this!*" She gestured toward my bedroom.

"I—I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Oh, I'm sure you don't! You don't know what Hugh's like when he's angry! Really *angry!* You don't know how much he hates Bram Ainsley! You won't be here much longer when he finds out what you and Ainsley have been up to, Mrs. Stuart!"

Wheeling, she stalked triumphantly away. Her vicious, gloating laughter echoed in my ears long after she had disappeared down the stairs.

I stood appalled. I did not care what Hugh might learn or think. I had come to Savage Key to marry Wesley. In her misguided attempts to keep me from stealing Hugh, Henrietta could ruin my relationship with Wesley. It was even more imperative now that I obtain his commitment to a wedding.

Fearful that she was on her way to speak to Hugh at that very moment, I hurried downstairs. I supposed Wesley would be in his study. Reaching the lower hall, I heard the murmur of voices from the drawing room. A man and a woman. When I was close enough, I paused and listened.

The man was Wesley. His tone was urgent. "You've got to send the skiff to Punta Blanca for the doctor!"

It was Pauline who replied, "In this storm? I wouldn't think of sending the boat out in such weather."

"You'd rather see Jennifer die!"

"Don't exaggerate. You know that Jennifer is given to hypochondriac moods."

"She's *sick!*" he insisted with anguish.

"She's been sick before." Pauline sounded completely unconcerned about her daughter. "She's always recovered without the aid of a doctor."

"She's running a high fever! She's out of her mind!"

"You're out of your mind if you think I'd risk the boat in this weather."

"Dammit, Pauline, if you won't send someone, I will!"

"Will you, Wesley? *I* run this house. The servants take their orders from *me*." Her voice took on a sarcastic sweetness. "Of course, if *you* want to take the boat out your-

self, and sail to Punta Blanca in this storm, I wouldn't think of trying to stop you."

There was silence. An intense, bitter silence. I could imagine how Pauline's words must have struck pain into Wesley. He was completely incapable of taking the boat out. He couldn't even bring himself to approach the surf on a calm, sunny day. Now his fear of the sea made it impossible for him to help his sister himself.

When he spoke again, his voice quavered. "I'll see father! *He'll* order someone sent!"

"You shan't!" she snapped. "You shall not disturb the captain with a trivial matter like this!"

"It's not trivial! Jennifer needs a doctor! If you won't send for one, Bram can take the boat and go himself! He can bring one!"

Again, there was silence.

I wondered if Bram would be willing to chance taking the small boat into the storm to get help for the woman he had married out of ambition. Did he care what happened to Jennifer, or was he merely playing the role of a devoted husband, sitting by her bedside while his ship went on to the next port without him?

I wanted to know. It seemed far more important to me than was at all reasonable. Yet I did not want to see him put to that test. My foolish heart shuddered at the thought of him in the little skiff, fighting a storm at sea.

Pauline gave in to Wesley. "All right, if you insist, I'll send someone. But if the boat is wrecked in the storm and a servant is drowned, it will be on your head."

"It's not storming so badly now as it was. It's beginning to taper off," Wesley said defensively.

A crash of thunder sounded as if it were just above the house.

"Hah!" Pauline said.

Wesley protested hopefully. "But it *is* tapering off!"

"It could be a momentary lull. The storm could begin to intensify any moment."

"Jennifer *needs* a doctor!"

"I said I'd send for one." Pauline sighed. "Wesley, don't you have work to do? Surely you can't have finished taking care of all the paperwork that *The Savage Star* brought in yesterday?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I suppose I do."

I ducked into the parlor before Wesley could discover me

eavesdropping. Breath held, I listened to his footsteps passing down the hall and through the library to the study. Then I heard the study door close.

I d.d not hear Pauline leave the drawing room. Was it possible that she had lied to Wesley? I wondered. Could she really refuse to send for a doctor for her own daughter?

Another question fretted at my mind. Where was Hugh? How long did I have before he would confront me about Henrietta's accusations?

After a few minutes, I left the parlor and looked in on Pauline. She was standing at a front window, gazing out. She heard, or sensed, my approach. Turning, she asked, "Yes, Mrs. Stuart?"

"I I wondered where Mister Marlin might be this morning. I thought that I should report to him on his daughter's progress with her lessons."

I saw a glimmer of dark amusement in her eyes at my naive implication that Hugh might actually care about his daughter's education. But she did not smile. As if she were sincere, she said, "I suppose that would be in order. But the poor boy hasn't come down yet. His travels do exhaust him so. When he has the opportunity to rest here at home, he seldom rises before noon. He works so hard on these business trips, you know."

I gave a nod of agreement and shaped an expression of sympathy for *the poor boy*, although I knew quite well just what it was he worked so hard at while he was away from Savage Key.

The news that he slept late came as a relief to me. I did not think Henrietta would dare awaken him. She would undoubtedly wait until he rose, before she would tell him that she'd seen Bram coming out of my bedroom.

I wanted to know whether Pauline intended to send for a doctor for Jennifer, as she had promised Wesley she would. I could not ask my question directly w.thout betraying the fact that I had eavesdropped. I said, "I understand that Ricky's mother is rather ill."

"It would seem so."

"Might it not be wise to get help for her? A doctor, perhaps?"

She looked askance at me. "I do not believe that is any of your business, Mrs. Stuart."

Gathering her skirts, she left the room.

She had lied to Wesley, I thought. I was tempted to tell

him so. But then he would have gone to Bram. As much as I wished to know what Bram would do about getting help for his wife, I feared finding out.

I reminded myself that if I spoke to Wesley about the matter, he would realize I had eavesdropped.

To ease my conscience, I told myself that Pauline was probably right. Jennifer probably wasn't so terribly ill. She would undoubtedly recover, as she had in the past. And, as Pauline had pointed out, it really wasn't any of my business.

I had my own problems. I had to obtain Wesley's proposal of marriage.

I found him in the study, bent over an open ledger. A pile of loose papers was at his elbow, and another stack of papers was impaled on a spindle next to the ledger.

He greeted me with a smile, but it was weak and wistful. I could see his concern for his sister, and the pain he still felt from Pauline's cruel words.

He was concerned for me, too, as he asked about my headache.

When I assured him that it was finally gone, there was relief in his face. But not enough. He would have to be distracted from his worries about Jennifer before he could be brought around to a proposal. I thought perhaps it would ease his mind to discuss the things that troubled him.

I told him that I had heard Jennifer was ill.

"Yes. Pauline is sending for a doctor for her," he said.

Hatred for Pauline, for her lies and scheming and brutal disregard for everyone except her son Hugh burned in my throat. Swallowing it down, I asked, "Then her illness is serious?"

He nodded. "She's so frail! She never should have gone out in the rain yesterday! Never!"

That had been Pauline's doing, I thought. Pauline had driven Jennifer to desperation with those vicious hints about Bram's behavior while he was away. I wondered if Bram might be as licentious ashore as Pauline implied. I supposed so. He seemed to have no qualms about venting his lust toward me. I assumed he would find the dockside whores just as much to his liking. It took effort for me to carry on my quiet conversation with Wesley. I was having difficulty keeping my thoughts in order.

I said, "Was that the cause of her illness?"

"It undoubtedly aggravated her condition. She has a very weak constitution. Even as a child, she was never strong. And

it has been very difficult for her since little Ricky was born. She hasn't been really well since then."

Thinking bitterly of Bram siring offspring solely to firm his grasp on the Savage fortune, I could not help but say, "Perhaps she shouldn't have had a child."

"I've thought that at times myself," Wesley admitted. "It might have been better for her health if she hadn't. But she wanted a child. She wanted to give Bram a son. You don't know how happy she was when she learned that she had given birth to a boy! Little Ricky means so much to her! I believe even if she had known in advance how difficult it would be for her and how much she would suffer, she still would have wanted to go through with it."

He looked at me with intense longing. "She loves them both very much, you know. Bram and little Ricky."

I nodded, momentarily wordless in the turbulence of my emotions. My envy of Jennifer was overwhelming. I felt that I, too, would have been willing to sacrifice my health, and even my life, for just a short time of happiness with Bram and a son like little Ricky.

Angrily, I told myself that there never could have been any happiness for me with Bram. Not with a man who married only for avarice. A man who did not love, but only lusted. A man who cared more for command of a ship than for lives of people.

"Is something wrong?" Wesley asked me.

I realized that I had become lost in my own thoughts. Forcing my mind back to my purpose in being with him, I said, "No, I was just thinking. You're very fond of little Ricky yourself, aren't you?"

He smiled, "It's strange. I never paid much attention to the children before you came here. I had no idea of the pleasures I was missing. They're delightful. It's such a joy working with them, explaining to them about the natural history of Savage Key. They're so eager for knowledge, so fascinated by it all. They're really—really—" His voice caught in his throat.

I said, "You should have children of your own, Mister Savage."

There was pain in his eyes as he mumbled, "I'm afraid that's not possible."

I hesitated, wondering if he referred to some secret physical deficiency.

He may have sensed my thought. He added in explanation,

"A child must have a mother as well as a father. That's a law of nature."

"You are opposed to marriage?"

Again, he smiled, but this was another very wistful smile. A very sad one. "A man has little opportunity to meet eligible young ladies here on Savage Key."

As he spoke, there was a very sharp crack of thunder. It sounded as if it broke immediately over the house. The very timbers of the building seemed to shudder. Wesley winced, his face suddenly ashen. His eyes widened in an instant of terror.

As the echo of the thunder died, he turned away from me. When he looked at me again, I could see the shame that he felt. Weakly, he said, "In any case, I think I am hardly the man to interest a young lady."

I protested, "You shouldn't say such things of yourself!"

A corner of his mouth quirked. "I speak the truth."

I shook my head in denial.

"You behold a coward, Mrs. Stuart," he told me. He was not able to continue facing me as he spoke. Rising from the desk, he turned his back to me.

I started to reply, but he interrupted me.

"No, please don't say polite things to me. I know myself. You don't. You don't know why I'm here on this damned isolated island. You don't know that I am trapped here by my own cowardice. Trapped!"

Years of anguish and self-condemnation overwhelmed him. The pressures in him forced out the words. He confessed himself to me in a flood of misery. "I *can't* leave here! Do you know why? I can't leave because I haven't the nerve to enter a boat! I can't even bring myself to go down onto the beach! I can't—"

He flinched as thunder crashed overhead again. With obvious difficulty, he went on. "Even during the calmest weather, I'm terrified of the sea! And during a storm -God! I cower here in my study when there's a real storm, afraid even to look out a window!"

Turning toward me, he met my eyes and spoke as if he begged my forgiveness for his flaw. "I know it's foolish, but I can't help it! I can't help it! God knows, I've tried!"

Suddenly he laughed. A sharp, bitter sound that was painful to hear. "Would you ever guess that I was born at sea? Would you believe it?"

He paused and squeezed his eyes closed as if he had beheld

something that he could not bear to look upon. Some very terrible memory, I thought. My heart went out to him as it might to a child in the throes of a cruel nightmare.

I put a hand gently on his arm. My touch startled him. With a jerk, he opened his eyes. Despair filled them.

"Tell me about it," I said softly. The compassion in my voice was not feigned.

He drew several deep breaths, steadying himself. With a glance toward the sideboard, he said, "Would you mind if I were to take a small drink in your presence?"

"Not at all."

He poured himself some brandy from the decanter on the sideboard, sipped it, then looked at me in question as if to reaffirm my interest.

"Please tell me," I said sincerely.

Again, he turned away from me. "Did you know that there is a curse on my family?"

"A curse?"

He nodded. "According to the legend, every man who bears the Savage name must suffer hell on earth."

"Do you believe the legend?" I asked.

"There are times that I wonder," he murmured. For a long moment, he was silent. I was about to encourage him to go on, when he finally spoke. From his hesitation and the strain in his voice, I knew it was quite painful for him to face the memories that he was putting into words.

"You know that my father was master of his own vessels until he suffered a stroke several years ago. When he was married to my mother, he had a topsail schooner, *The Savage Dream*. My mother sailed with him aboard *The Dream*. I was born on shipboard. So was Henrietta. The schooner was my only home for the first few years of my life. I loved it. I loved the sea then. The vessel was my whole world. The center of that world was my mother. I loved her very much."

He paused to sip at his brandy. Then he went on. "*The Savage Dream* died in a storm. *The Dream* and my mother. It was a terrible storm—a hurricane—it flung us onto a reef. Tore the heart out of the schooner. We were trying to get off in a small boat. Father had me. Mother had Henrietta. Henrietta was just a baby then. She doesn't remember any of it, or of mother. But I do! I remember it all! The wind—the rain—mother with the baby in her arms, trying to get into the boat. The canvas in shreds and the ship's timbers screaming as it was torn apart, and then, a sound like the crash of

thunder—no, it was worse—worse than anything I've ever heard—the mainmast splintering—falling—"

He choked on the words. On the memory. When he tried to say more, he couldn't.

I saw it all vividly in my imagination. The mast, shattered by the raging storm, falling. Striking the woman.

I stepped up behind Wesley and put a hand on his shoulder. Wanting to relieve him of the burden of words that he struggled to speak but could not, I said gently, "It killed her?"

He nodded.

And turned to hug me like a child desperate for comfort. I closed my arms around him as he sobbed against my breast.

I suspected that he had never before given such release to the stress of the terrifying memories that haunted him. It seemed as if he wept a lifetime of withheld tears. I found myself almost weeping with him. My heart ached for the forlorn child that he had been. And still seemed to be as he found haven in my arms.

Aware that the more he talked of the past, the more the strain within him might ease, I drew him on. Brokenly, he spoke of the horrors of his childhood.

His father, believing that his fears would soon pass, brought him to the family home on Savage Key. During the trip, he had been incapacitated by paroxyms of panic. On the key, surrounded by water, he had hidden in his room, refusing to leave it.

Captain Savage did not comprehend the depth of his son's disturbance. He could not cope with the boy. Needing someone to care for both children, he had remarried hastily.

The new Mrs. Savage seemed kindly enough when she first entered the family home. She attempted to deal with Wesley's fears. But she was stern and unsympathetic. She tried to drive him out of his cowardice by taunts. She tried to cure him of fearing the water by forcing him into it. But when he was dragged toward the surf, he went into convulsions. Eventually, she lost all patience with him. Her harsh disciplines degenerated into cruel abuses.

When Pauline first moved into Savage House, Hugh was in boarding school. During his vacations, visiting his mother on the isolated key, he entertained himself by tormenting Wesley and Henrietta. Pauline's obvious adoration of her own son, and her partiality toward him in preference to her stepchildren intensified Wesley's awareness that she really cared noth-

ing at all for him. Henrietta, too, sensed Pauline's true feelings and took refuge by retreating into the private world of her own mind.

Wesley's only real companion was his baby sister, Jennifer. Pauline had not wanted the baby. When Jennifer was born, she turned the infant over to a wet nurse. The hired woman gave little Jennifer good care, but it was Wesley who gave her loving attention.

Growing into adulthood, Wesley resigned himself to the barren limits of his meager world. He sought solace in books, in collections and studies, and in the business of keeping his father's accounts. Trapped on Savage Key by the fear that he considered an inexcusable character flaw, he never so much as hoped to someday have a wife and family of his own.

Although he did not say so directly, I realized that the arrival of a governess for the children on Savage Key had filled him with joyful hope for the possibility of an intellectual companion. His most ambitious dream concerning me was that I would eventually come to respect him as a friend. He had not even ventured to think of me as a potential wife.

When he finally managed to subdue his tears, he pulled from my arms with chagrined apologies. It was evident that he feared his display of emotion had destroyed any respect I might have entertained for him.

But his confession had done him no harm in my eyes. Before I knew the cause of his unnatural terror of the sea, I had considered it a flaw in his character. Knowing the reason for it, I realized that it was no fault of his own. If his childhood had been different, he might not have been weak and fearful, I thought. And despite his weakness, I did truly respect him for his virtues, for his gentleness, his intelligence, and his honesty.

I had cared nothing at all for him when I first arrived on Savage Key in my guise as a governess. I had thought of him only as the heir to the Savage fortune. Coming to know and understand him, I discovered that I now cared about him very much.

My feeling was not love. Not the all-encompassing passionate emotion I had once dreamed of. It was a fondness such as an elder sister might feel toward a young and needful brother.

He stood before me, turned slightly away, unable to face me as he begged my forgiveness for his outburst. Beyond the

windows, the storm continued. At each violent crash of thunder, he flinched. Each time, I winced a little in sympathy.

I struggled to retain my grasp on the role that I had come to Savage Key to play. I was not successful. It was Laura Wickham who answered his plea for forgiveness. Sincerely, I told him that there was nothing to be forgiven. He had done nothing, said nothing to offend me or disillusion me. I understood. I cared.

He seemed stunned by my reply. When he spoke again, his voice was almost a whisper, as if he hardly dared to admit his thought, yet could not contain it. Haltingly, with a stiffly unnatural formality, he said, "I if only I—would God that I were in a position to entreat the consideration of your affection—"

This was the moment!

I knew that now, with just a few well chosen words, I could command his declaration of love. I could obtain the proposal of marriage from him that I had come to Savage Key for. But I found myself unable to reply.

I was aware that when he expressed his wish for my affection, he'd had but small hope of encouragement. During the silence, while I hunted for words and for the ability to speak them, his shoulders slumped. His meager hope faded completely.

From within the house, I heard the slam of a door. Boots hammered in the upstairs hallway. I recognized those determined steps. The person who hurried along the hall was Bram Ainsley.

My heart knotted. I understood that it was my desire for Bram Ainsley that stood between me and the goal I had set for myself. My body, my being, longed for him.

But not as I knew him. Not insolent and arrogant and ruthless.

I told myself that the Bram Ainsley I dreamed of was but a fantasy, just as the Don Orlando I had cherished had been. I told myself that no such man as I dreamed of existed—ever had—ever would. Life was a cold, harsh reality of cruel, selfish ambitions. I must meet it on its own terms if I wished to survive. If I wanted to prosper, I must be even more selfish and grasping than the people around me.

My voice catching, almost breaking, I said to Wesley, "There is no need of entreaty. My affection is already yours."

He jerked as if the thunder had crashed overhead again. Turning, he looked at me with total disbelief.

"You would not—*could* not—not for me!"

I lowered my eyes. The flush that reddened my face was real. But my embarrassment was not that of modesty. It was caused by shame. The essence of my being rebelled at this deception.

But I was determined. I would have my revenge on Hugh and Pauline, and on Bram Ainsley.

I murmured, "Please, it is not seemly for a woman to speak her mind in such matters. It's the man's place—"

"I hardly think of myself as a *man*," he said bitterly.

"You do not know yourself very well then," I replied. "You should think of yourself as I do, with respect and admiration and—and deep affection!"

Amazed, he said, "Then you would consider allowing me to offer my suit?"

I tried to answer. I could not shape the words. Disgust with myself filled me How could I go on with this scheme and deceive him so? How could—

A voice from the hallway cut sharply across my tormented thoughts. Bram shouted for Pauline. He demanded loudly to know why the skiff was at the dock, why no one had gone to get a doctor for Jennifer.

Jealousy surged through me. A mingling of self-pity and loathing overwhelmed me. I hated myself and all the world. I would destroy Bram Ainsley, even if it meant my own destruction—and that of everyone around me.

"Yes!" I breathed sharply in reply to Wesley.

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The words were spoken, the commitment made.

Suddenly I felt empty, drained of all energy and emotion.

Wesley seemed stunned, awakening only slowly to the realization that I actually had accepted him. I could sense the joy that came with awareness spreading through him like the blossoming of a flower. It filled him, then burst from him in wild laughter.

He wept as he laughed and hugged me to him. Again and again, he repeated his disbelief, until finally he did believe.

Like an exuberant child with a great wonder to show, he exclaimed, "Come! We must tell father!"

Clutching my hand, he hurried me from the library. As we dashed up the stairs, I felt that I had left all trace of Laura Wickham—and all reality—behind me. I was an actress on my way to a performance. Wesley and the old man I was to face were merely characters in the play.

By the time we reached the door of Captain Savage's bedroom, I was once again in my role.

The door stood open. We went on past the servant who sat by it like a watchman or a guard. I stepped through the doorway feeling as if I walked onstage at a cue.

In the years since I had been there last, the room had changed little. Captain Savage had changed a great deal.

His hair had thinned and was snowy white against the pillow his head rested on. His once-rugged face was gaunt, the cheeks and eyes sunken, the skin almost as pallid as his hair. He seemed so wasted that I might have thought him dead, but as I entered the room, I saw the glint of his eyes turning toward me.

They still held a sharpness and a vitality that was in startling contrast to his withered face.

I saw the movement of his lips. I sensed as much as heard the word that he whispered.

"Laura!"

His recognition shocked me back into an awareness of myself. I darted a glance at Wesley, my mind racing in search of some way to explain my deception to him. But he appeared unaware of the word his father had spoken. His happiness overwhelmed him, making him oblivious to all else.

Quickly, hoping that the captain would see and understand, but that Wesley would not, I pressed a finger to my lips.

"Father!" Wesley said eagerly, "I have the most wonderful news! Mrs. Stuart has consented to be my wife!"

The captain did not recognize the name. His face rumpled in an awkward one-sided frown. "Mrs. Stuart?"

Wesley gestured at me. "This is Mrs. Stuart, father. I—she—she's a widow—she came here as governess to the children. She's a wonderful woman! Educated and -and—oh, father!" He grabbed the old man's bony hand, squeezing it enthusiastically. "I'm so happy!"

"Mrs. Stuart, is it?" The captain cocked a brow at me. The vitality gleamed in his eyes. "I knew you'd come, girl. I knew when you understood, you'd come around and see it my way."

Puzzled by his father's words, Wesley asked, "What? Do you know Mrs. Stuart, father?"

"Aye." The captain smiled, just one corner of his mouth twisting upward. His eyes stayed on me. I could see the deep satisfaction in them. He sighed as if with relief. "It's all well now I thank God you've come at last, girl. It's been a long, hard voyage, and I've ached like the devil for sight of safe harbor. You'll take the helm now, eh, girl? And let an old man furl his sails for the last time?"

"What do you mean, father?" Wesley said.

"The rocks and reefs and white water of living have stove me, boy. I've stayed afloat through it all just to see you in good tow. When it's done, I'll be able to settle to the bottom in peace."

"Don't talk that way!"

"Shush, boy! Do you hate me so much that you'd have my torment on this earth prolonged? Splice lines quickly, I say, and let me be free!"

"Father, please don't—"

"Hear me, boy!"

"Yes, sir," Wesley murmured obediently, although he was obviously very distressed by the captain's talk of death.

Captain Savage turned to me. "Keep a strong hand on the helm, girl, and a weather eye on that bitch, Pauline, until you've scuttled her. Bram will help you hold your course. You hear?"

"Yes, sir," I murmured, as Wesley had. I felt strangely as if it were not my own will, but that of this old man, that had

brought me back to Savage Key to fulfill his wishes. It was as if he, not I, wrote the play I acted.

"Bless you, child," he said, relaxing. As his head sunk into the pillow, he dismissed us by letting his eyes close. The corner of his mouth remained upturned in that twisted, but satisfied, smile.

Wesley took my hand and led me from the room. We walked down the hall together in silence. At the head of the stairs, Wesley turned to me. "He spoke as if he knew you."

"Perhaps he mistakes me for someone else," I replied.

He nodded, but he added, "You know, it's very odd, but I feel as if we have met before, myself."

"In some other life?" I shaped a smile as if I jested. But I had come to think of that previous meeting when I was simply innocent little Laura Wickham as another life. A life now far behind me.

He replied with a smile of his own. "Our meeting was planned by fate before the beginning of time."

I gave a nod and wondered if that could be true. I still had the feeling that no matter how I might struggle to steer my own course through life, I was being impelled toward some unknown destiny by intangible winds and tides.

As we descended the stairs, I told myself firmly that I was falling a victim to the oppressive atmosphere of Savage House and my own imagination. My life was in my own hands, to be lived as I chose, if I had strength enough to take what I wanted. Tides of fate and family curses were as much foolish fantasy as my dreams of a tender, loving Bram Ainsley. Such fantasies were weakness, to be despised and overcome.

I was deep in thought as we reached the second floor. Wesley startled me when he exclaimed, "There's Bram! Come, we must tell him!"

A shudder went through me as I saw Bram. He was pacing before the door to Jennifer's room. His back was to us. For an instant, I wanted to flee before he could turn. I did not want to face him.

But I must, I told myself.

Wesley tugged at my hand. "Come on!"

I could not escape. I had committed myself to a role and I had to play it through. Calling on all of my strength of will, all of my ability as an actress, I managed to compose myself.

Bram turned. His face was stark as he looked toward us. "Damn her!"

"W—what? Who?" Wesley stammered, taken aback. "What's the matter?"

There was anguish in Bram's voice. "Pauline! She was supposed to be sending for a doctor for Jen!"

"She told me she would," Wesley said.

"Well, she didn't! The skiff's still at the pier. Now Jen's having a seizure! She needs help! I went to send someone myself, but there isn't anyone. The men have all disappeared. God knows where! Dolores says Pauline sent them on some errand. But not for a doctor for Jen! There's nobody to handle the skiff. Nobody but me, and I promised Jen I wouldn't leave the key until she's better. I—dammit—I don't know what to do!"

Wesley stepped to the door. He rattled the knob. The door refused to open. He asked Bram, "Who's with her?"

"Pauline and Henrietta and Nita. They're all with her, but they won't let me in. They say it's no place for a man! Dammit, she's my *wife!*" Bram gave a violent shake of his head. "The devil take that woman! She insists that it's nothing serious! Just a slight cold, she says! I wish to God Jen would let me take her away from this place—"

"No!" Wesley protested.

I looked askance at him.

His face flushed. His eyes were frightened. "I don't mean—I—Bram, you *can't* take Jen away! She's the only one here who—who—"

I knew he was thinking that Jennifer was the only one on Savage Key who had ever given him affection and companionship. He was desperate not to lose that.

Squeezing his hand, I reminded him, "I'm here now."

He sighed with relief at my reassurance. The joy he had felt earlier returned to overpower his concern for his sister. "Bram I have the most wonderful news! Mrs. Stuart and I are to be married!"

Bram's harsh eyes turned toward me. I could not read the emotion that flashed through them. It seemed wild and fierce, as if the news angered rather than pleased him.

Triumphantly, I said, "Captain Savage wishes it."

"What's this? Did I hear someone say something about marriage?" The voice was Hugh's. I had not been aware of his coming up behind me. Wincing, I wheeled toward him.

Although he was immaculately dressed, with his hair neatly pomaded and the stickpin perfectly positioned in his cravat,

he had a rumpled air about him, as if the fogs of his dissipation blurred his image in some way. He eyed me suspiciously.

Wesley stiffened. Defiance edged his voice as he told Hugh, "Mrs. Stuart has kindly consented to become my wife."

"The hell you say!" Hugh snapped. His face blanched.

Wesley nodded.

Hugh's surprise gave way to anger. His thick nostrils flared. His upper lip drew back, showing his teeth in a snarling leer. "Congratulations! You are to be complimented on your good fortune, Wesley. You are getting a magnificent *slut!*"

Shocked, Wesley paled.

I glanced at Bram. His eyes were filled with contempt and anger and puzzlement as he gazed at me.

I gathered myself and glared indignantly at Hugh. "Sir!"

He laughed. To Wesley, he said, "Don't be deceived by her prim appearance. She is excellent in bed. I can attest to that. You must get her to tell you about the night that she and I spent—"

He stopped short as the door to Jennifer's room flew open. Henrietta stood framed in the doorway. She frowned at us all as she grumbled, "What's this noise? Don't you know there's a sick woman in here?"

Bram took an anxious step toward her. "Jennifer—?"

"She's resting now," Henrietta told him curtly. Her attention had gone to her husband. Her mouth tightened grimly at whatever she read in his face.

He told her, "Wesley has just announced his impending marriage. To Mrs. Stuart."

"I want to see my wife," Bram said. He sounded oddly as if he needed comfort from her in a moment of despair.

As he started for the bedroom, Henrietta blocked his way. She closed the door behind her and pressed her back to it.

Although she spoke to Bram, her eyes were on Hugh. Her words were meant for him. With the same kind of sarcastic sweetness I had heard Pualine use so often, she said, "Do you? Really? Wouldn't you rather visit a while with Mrs. Stuart? Now? Quickly, before she has gone on to another bed?"

She was certain that Hugh had not sent me to Savage Key solely to be a governess to his daughter. She was telling him that he had been betrayed. Not only by my engagement to Wesley, but even before that—with Bram Ainsley.

"What!" Bram snapped at her.

Her face remained grim, but her eyes showed vicious satisfaction. "Oh, I know all about it! I saw you coming out of her bedroom in your shirtsleeves!"

Wesley clutched my hand and looked at me in pained question.

My mind, my emotions, spun wildly. I stammered, "I—yes—but it was—I almost fainted in the hallway. Mister Ainsley kindly assisted me into my room. That was all!"

Wesley wanted to believe me. I could see his need to believe.

I added, "You remember? I had been so ill with that terrible headache. I suppose I hadn't quite recovered. I went into the hallway and suddenly I was quite faint. I might have fallen down the stairs if Mister Ainsley hadn't helped me."

To Wesley, I had become his one hope of a happy life and a family of his own. He willingly accepted my claim of innocence. His faith in me showed in his face as he told Henrietta, "You were mistaken."

"Was I?" she snarled, watching Hugh.

He obviously believed that Bram had enjoyed pleasures he considered to be his exclusive right. But there was nothing he could say about it in front of his wife without forcing the issue of his infidelity and shattering the slim pretense that he and she maintained together.

I could sense his raging hatred of Bram, like the heat of a blazing fire.

Bram had drawn back from the rest of us. He stood as if he were on the other side of a great glass wall, apart from us and wanting no part of us. Yet he somehow seemed to long to join us. The mingling of emotion in his eyes was beyond my ability to comprehend. Only the spark of eternal contempt was clear to me.

My own emotions were an uncontrollable turmoil. I felt incapable of continuing in my role. I had to flee.

"Wesley, this—I—I feel faint. I think I had better rest awhile. Would you see me back to my room?" I said.

Turning his back on the others, on their anger and accusations, he smiled gently at me. "Of course."

At my door, he stammered out his assurances that he could not accept any of the slanders that had been raised against me. He might have continued for hours, professing his faith and love. I had to feign dizziness and throw myself across the bed to force him to leave me in privacy.

Even then, it took much persuading to convince him that I

did not need a woman to attend me or a sleeping powder to help me rest.

Finally, he went.

Alone in the shadows of the room, I lay listening to the rain beat on the roof of the veranda and the thunder rumble beyond my windows. The storm outside seemed as persistent as the tempest within me. For a while, I despaired that either would ever cease.

33

A timid knock at my door interrupted my brooding. Collecting myself, I rose and answered it.

Dolores stood before me. My first thought was that Wesley had sent her to me despite my insistence that I did not need anyone to attend me But her demeanor told me that this was not so. Her eyes were downcast and her fingers were entwined, working against one another. She appeared very nervous, perhaps even a little frightened.

"What is it? Is something wrong?" I asked, fearful that one of the children she had been caring for might have suffered a mishap.

She kept her face downturned, looking shyly at me through her lashes. "It is about Ma'am Jennifer."

"What? Has her condition worsened?"

"No. Not now. She is better now. She is rest quiet."

The relief I felt at that news surprised me. I had not realized how much I cared what might happen to the woman who shared the marriage bed with Bram Ainsley.

"But I have the fear for her," Dolores continued. "I am—please, ma'am, I have the need to talk of something. You are listen and advise me, yes? Please?"

Stepping back, I gestured for her to come on into my room.

"You will not tell of what I say?" she asked.

"I promise."

She closed the door behind her. Slowly, as if she expected to be severely chastized, she told me, "I have done a thing that the Ma'am Pauline will not like."

"What?"

"I am have fear for Ma'am Jennifer. Nita tell me it is seem she was to die today. This is bad. The mother of little Ricky should not be die without the blessing. The priest is now in our village. I, am send Ramon to bring him here. I know Ma'am Pauline will be angry. She will say it is not the place of the servant to do such a thing. But Ma'am Jennifer was seem so much to die and I worry so for her. Is it wrong what I do?"

She looked entreatingly at me.

She was undoubtedly right that Pauline would be angry,

but I felt her act of compassion touching. I wondered if anyone on Savage Key would be so considerate of me, if it were I who lay seriously ill.

I replied, "No, it isn't wrong."

"Ma'am Pauline will say it is," she mumbled.

"Then Ma'am Pauline will be mistaken. Don't worry, Dolores. Ma'am Pauline will not be the ruler of this household much longer."

"Que?"

I told her, "Mister Wesley and I are to be married."

Astonishment spread across her face, followed by joy. "Oh, it is good! It is be so good for Mister Wesley!"

The joy flickered in her eyes. She paused, then said with some doubt, "And you will be then the mistress of the house?"

I nodded.

Tentatively, as if she offered a warning, she suggested, "Ma'am Pauline will not be happy."

"I think not," I agreed. Pauline would be very unhappy. She would certainly do everything in her power to prevent the wedding from taking place. "But she shall have nothing to say about it. It is the will of Captain Savage."

"Oh!" she exclaimed with satisfaction and gave a little nod. She appeared to have absolute faith that the will of the captain could prevail over all else. Eagerly, she asked, "Is all right, I go tell the others, yes?"

"Yes."

"It will make happy among the servants!" She was laughing lightly as she left.

So a priest was on his way to Savage House, I mused. That was interesting.

The storm continued unabated through the afternoon. The rain was still pouring down and lightning still streaked the cloud-heavy sky when the priest arrived.

I had been watching for him. When I saw two riders coming toward the house, I hurried to tell Pauline what I had seen. I did not give her any hint that I had been expecting them and knew who they were.

The news of visitors on the way took her aback. She was obviously not in the mood to receive company. Wanting to see her reaction when she learned that her guest was a priest who had come to attend Jennifer, I followed her to the door.

Ramon had brought the priest from the village at the southern tip of the key by horseback. It was a long, hard ride. Despite being bundled in oilskins, both were drenched when they reached the house. Ramon took the horses on around to the stable. The priest dashed up the steps to the shelter of the veranda.

I could sense Pauline's anger as she learned who he was and why he had come. She managed to control any show of emotion. As politely as if she were sincere, she welcomed him into the house.

She told him that the message he had received was in error; Jennifer was only mildly ill and was resting quite comfortably.

He was distressed to discover that his arduous trip had been in vain. He seemed really disappointed that no one was dying.

Since it was late and the weather was so foul, it was not practical for him to return to the village that night. Pauline had no alternative but to offer him the hospitality of Savage House.

Apparently, he felt the prospect of a warm meal and a dry, comfortable bedroom for the night was more than adequate compensation for the discomfort he had endured in coming. His acceptance was as eager as it was gracious.

He was Father John, a young man with a nervous air about him. I suspected he had not been ordained long and the task of administering to the Indians of the coast was his first position. He did not appear too confident of himself. I thought it should not be difficult to draw him into my scheme.

Hearing voices in the hall, Wesley came from his study to investigate. He volunteered to lend the priest some clothing while his own attire was being dried.

Pauline called a servant to show the priest up to a spare bedroom, then ordered a formal dinner prepared for the evening meal.

I waited until Wesley was in his study again. When I went in to speak to him, I found the adjoining door to the library was open. Through it, I saw him at his desk, bent over an open book. He looked rapt in contemplation of what he read, but I sensed that his thoughts were far from the printed page.

Pausing in the doorway, I rapped lightly. He looked up with a start. His face was filled with question and doubt as he nodded in greeting.

His expression disturbed me. Hugh and Henrietta had cast vicious aspersions on my character. At the time, Wesley had refused to listen to them. I was afraid that now he had begun to have second thoughts.

I asked, "Is something wrong?"

He shook his head, but his eyes belied his denial.

With a tone of distress, I said, "Do you believe those cruel, evil things that Mister Marlin said about me?"

"No! Of course not!" He spoke too quickly with too much emphasis. I knew that was exactly what he had been considering.

"I—I don't know why he'd say such things!" I stammered. "And your sister, too! Oh, Wesley, why would they say such terrible things about me?"

He looked at me a long, long moment, then sighed deeply. He was truly a gentle person, and it obviously pained him to speak his mind in this matter. But the doubts that he entertained must have been equally painful to him. Slowly, he said, "It seems very unlike Hugh to think of sending a governess for his daughter. He seldom pays any attention to Charlotte."

I widened my eyes in a look akin to horror. "Do you think—did he did he have some design on me when he hired me to come here? If he had given me the least hint of—of—oh, Wesley! I'd rather have starved than take a position under such circumstances! How could I bear to let such a person even touch me!"

I shuddered convincingly.

Wesley rose to come face me. I held my eyes on his. He gazed down into them, as if to search the mind behind them.

"If I'd had any idea that Mister Marlin might expect me to be something other than a governess for Charlotte . . ." I let my voice fade into a hint of a sob. "I should never have come here! If—if—but if I hadn't come here, I would never have met you!"

The doubt faded from his eyes. He put his hands lightly on my arms. At that offer of comfort, I embraced him, pressing my face into his shoulder.

He slid his hands onto my back, holding me.

I had managed to allay his uncertainties, at least for the moment. Feeling that I must secure my position, I caught my breath and said faintly, "Why did they say such things about me? Don't they want us to be married? Don't they want us to be happy?"

"No," he admitted. "I think they don't. Not Pauline or Hugh. I think they'd like to see an end to the Savage bloodline. Pauline fought Jennifer's marriage to Bram. She hates little Ricky. If I were to father a child with the Savage name as well as the blood—"

"We mustn't let her interfere! We must do as your father wishes! We must arrange to be married as quickly as possible!"

"Yes." He fell into thought, then suggested, "The priest! Perhaps he—no, he'd insist on all the usual formalities."

"He might not," I said. "Not if I explained."

"It certainly wouldn't do any harm to talk to him, would it? We could have him begin the preparations and make arrangements for him to return and perform the ceremony as soon as possible."

"Let me talk to him. I may be able to persuade him to marry us immediately, before Pauline can interfere."

"We should go together."

It was important that I speak to the priest alone. I knew he would want to refuse my request. To convince him, I would probably have to tell him lies that I would not want Wesley to hear.

Wesley yielded to me. He waited in the study while I went in search of Father John.

I found him in the upstairs hallway. He had just come out of the guest room. As I had expected, he was unwilling to take me into the privacy of the bedroom with him. The very idea flustered him.

Putting agitation into my voice and face, I pleaded that I was desperate to have my confession heard. Against his better judgment, he gave in and allowed me behind the closed door with him.

Suddenly, I discovered myself unable to tell the lies that I had planned. I could not speak them to this guileless man of the cloth. Instead, I found myself weeping uncontrollably.

In his fumbling, uncertain way, he tried to comfort me and draw me forth.

My heart cried for me to bare its secrets. It begged me to reveal its passions. But I could not voice my true feelings to anyone, not even this priest. I could not speak of my longing for Bram Ainsley, and of my loathing of him. I could not tell of Hugh Marlin's sin against me, and of my plans for revenge.

When, at last, I was able to speak, all I could tell him was

that Wesley and I wished to be married and that we feared Wesley's stepmother would try to prevent it.

He offered to discuss the matter with her.

I knew that would be worse than useless. Pauline would only smile sweetly and convince him that she was in the right.

Once I had spoken, I was able to regain a little of my self-control. Calling upon my skills as an actress, I pleaded with him to perform the ceremony for us while he was at Savage House.

He lacked the confidence to break with the protocol that he had been taught. He insisted we must observe the proper formalities.

I explained something of the difficulties to him. I told him of Wesley's inability to leave Savage Key. I entreated him with such desperation that he promised to consider the matter and advise me of his decision in the morning.

As I left him, I felt strangely relieved that he had not consented to marry us immediately. I cursed myself for the feeling. It was the weakness of Laura Wickham in me, I thought. The child part of me that still dreamed dreams and fancied that they might possibly come true. Sternly, I told myself that it was imperative that I continue in my scheme. I must marry Wesley.

I must!

I must destroy Bram Ainsley, I told myself. Or the emotions I felt for him would destroy me.

34

That evening, for the first time since I had arrived on Savage Key in my role as Mrs. Stuart, I would be dining with the family. I was no longer simply a governess, a step above the household servants, but still socially below the members of the family. Now I was engaged to become Wesley's wife. Tonight, I would sit at his side to be presented to all assembled when he made the formal announcement of our betrothal at the dinner table.

I had brought a variety of clothing with me to Savage Key. I had one especially lovely gown, which I was tempted to wear that night. But on consideration, I decided it would not be wise to reveal myself suddenly in the way that the gorgeous butterfly emerges from its drab cocoon. My emergence in my most flattering garb would have to wait until after the knots of matrimony were firmly tied, and my position in the Savage family was too secure for Pauline to interfere.

The dress I chose for myself was moderately stylish in a conservative way. It was of dark burgundy foulard with three tiers of deep pleats on the skirt, a pleat-trimmed overskirt, and a high-necked basque. Although the color was not my best, it did emphasize the smooth whiteness of my complexion. The fitted basque would reveal as much of my lush figure as my corset allowed.

I drew my hair back severely from my face, as usual, but did not bind it into the tight knot of a bun that I had been wearing. This time, I worked it into a cluster of natural curls at the back of my head. The occasion of my betrothal would justify that much change, and the style was certainly more flattering to me than the bun had been.

I completed my costume with a simple parure of German silver and mock pearls. Dressed, my appearance was that of a woman neither plain nor beautiful, of a restrained nature and limited means, but possessing good taste.

I dallied in my room for several minutes after I heard the call to dinner. When I went down, Wesley was awaiting me at the door to the dining room. To judge from his face when he saw me, he found me as lovely as if I had been attired in the most elegant of my stage costumes. He beamed with pleasure when he bowed and offered me his arm.

The others were already in the dining room. All had dressed for the occasion.

Pauline reigned in a toilette of various shades of dusty rose. Her gown was of light faille, with dark stripes of satin, and a bias flounce at the hem. The overskirt was fashioned from two broad scarves of crepe de Chine in the same dark shade as the stripes. The scarves were crossed in front and carried around to knot in the back, the ends falling over her train. Her square-cut neckline was adorned with white lace, as were her Marie Antoinette sleeves. At her throat, she wore a lavaliere of marvelously delicate enamel and cloisonné work in a frame of intricate gold filigree.

I wondered if Captain Savage had given her that lovely piece of jewelry. Was it, perhaps, an old family heirloom? Pirate treasure from the loot of that past Captain Savage who had brought a curse down upon himself and his descendants?

Pauline's figure was still as trim and shapely as that of a young woman. If it had not been for the terrible smallpox scars marring her face, she would have been truly beautiful.

If it had been for those scars, she might never have married Captain Savage, I thought. With a different, more caring stepmother, perhaps Wesley would have found confidence in himself, and happiness as a man, instead of the lonely misery that haunted him. Perhaps Henrietta would have blossomed as a woman and wed a man who cared for her, instead of a fortune hunter who betrayed her at every opportunity. Perhaps there would never have been a Jennifer Savage to marry Bram Ainsley and bear his son.

Perhaps I would have remained in Cuba and married Don Orlando. I might never have encountered Bram. And my heart might never have known the painful yearning that wrenched at it as I glanced at him, then looked quickly away.

By chance, I turned toward Henrietta and discovered that she was staring grimly at me. I returned her gaze defiantly.

Despite her fashionable attire, Henrietta managed to look drab. Her gown was of dark green Sicilienne, with a high-necked polonaise. The elegantly slashed-and-draped skirt was trimmed with fluted flounces and matching satin bows. It would have flattered her figure had she carried herself well. But she stood with her shoulders hunched stiffly and her head thrust forward. The posture gave her a look rather like a predatory bird on a perch peering about for a victim.

Her drawn, sallow face with its hate-filled eyes belied the gaiety of the gown and the sparkle of the gold and emerald

parure she wore. I wondered if those gorgeous earrings and that graceful necklace were a part of the cursed captain's loot. Surely poor Henrietta suffered as if a curse had fallen upon her.

Hugh was making some small efforts at being attentive to her. I supposed that he was either trying to allay the suspicions she had expressed earlier, or else he wanted to appear a devoted husband before the priest It was obvious that he had no taste for the chore. He seemed to consider his wife a nuisance that circumstances forced him to endure, and that he hoped to escape as soon as he could.

He was wearing full evening dress. His black cashmere suit was perfectly tailored. As always, his linen collar was immaculate, his cravat precisely tied, and his stickpin very carefully positioned. His hair was so well brushed and pomaded that not a single strand appeared to be astray. His moustaches were so neatly trimmed and waxed that they seemed unreal, as if they were a pair of well-sculpted ornaments mounted beneath his nose. But, as with Pauline and Henrietta, his face ruined the effect of his attire.

Dissipation gave a flabbiness to the flesh under his eyes and at his neck. There was a reddish tone to the thickened flare of his nostrils. His full, sensuous lips drooped in a suggestion of a pout, and the heavy lids of his eyes only half hid the jealous anger that blazed behind them when he looked at me.

His attitude so irritated me that I turned away from his gaze to offer Wesley a very apparent tender, loving smile such as I knew would infuriate Hugh.

Wesley was not as well dressed as the others of the family. I suspected that he did not own evening attire. Certainly he would have few occasions to use it on Savage Key.

The suit he wore was of pearl gray worsted and nicely cut, but a little loose in the fit. His shoulders slumped under the fine fabric of the coat. Although his hair was properly brushed and all of his accessories were in good taste, he still had a vaguely disheveled air about him. When I looked closely at him, I realized that his cravat was knotted a bit off center, and his collar was not so smoothly turned as it should have been. But it was not so much small flaws of dress like these that gave him a rumpled look. It was his expression He appeared flustered and very self-conscious, as if he felt himself totally out of place among the others in their ornate plumage.

Slipping my hand into his, I gave it a reassuring squeeze.

The answering pressure affirmed that he badly needed the strength of my support and encouragement.

Bram was engrossed in discussion with Father John. Hopeful that he would not notice, I allowed myself to look directly at him. And I thrilled to the look of him.

He was in the dark blue uniform of a merchant captain. It appeared new, tailored to fit the broadness of his shoulders and the fullness of his chest. His brass buttons, struck with the emblem of The Savage Line, and the gilt braid of his office on his sleeves gleamed. His collar and cravat appeared equally fresh and were perfectly adjusted. But his unruly hair defied the comb that had tried to subdue it. A lock the color of ivory straggled over his forehead, contrasting with the dark tan of his face. The marks of wind and weather on his skin gave him more the look of a workman than a gentleman, a look of power and competent ability.

There was a suggestion of insolence in the proud grace of his stance, and a hint of distraction, as if his thoughts were far from the formal dinner that he had dressed for. An air of contempt and impatience surrounded him. As I looked at him, I thought again of a tiger restrained in its jungle wildness only by the force of an iron-strong will.

He finished whatever he had been discussing with the priest and started to turn. I jerked my gaze away from him quickly, fearful of what I might find in his eyes if they met mine.

The servants had used heated irons to dry and press the priest's attire. Dressed again in his own proper vestments, he seemed more confident than he had when I spoke to him earlier. But as he bobbed his head in greeting to me, I could see that there was still doubt in his face. He had not yet decided whether he should yield to my entreaties and perform the hurried wedding that I had begged him for.

He was the guest of honor this evening. The presence of an honored guest in Savage House was an unusual event. Even the table had been formally dressed for the occasion. It was draped in delicately fashioned Irish lace, with settings of eggshell porcelain and highly polished silver. The knives, with their intricately ornamented handles, the matching spoons, and three-tined forks appeared to be of antique Spanish design. The graceful crystal was leaded and faceted, catching jewel-like glints of light from the beeswax tapers burning in the arms of the twin golden candelabra on the table.

I wondered if the young priest had ever heard the story of the pirate Captain Savage and the curse on his family. Did

Father John suspect, as I did, that we were to be dining upon the plunder of thieves and murderers?

Despite the festive decor and the polite efforts of everyone present, there was no true gaiety about our gathering. Wesley was tense with anticipation of the announcement that he intended to make when the meal was done. The others of the family, already aware that I had accepted his proposal, were all angered by it.

Pauline feared my potential influence on Wesley and the possibility that I might bear new claimants to the Savage fortune. Hugh, considering me his personal property, felt betrayed my me. Henrietta resented me for the relationship she believed I had with her husband and was loath to see me secure a place for myself in the family. And Bram, in his ruthless ambition, must surely despise me as a competitor for power in the Savage family.

Although he was cheerful and at ease when the meal began, Father John soon succumbed to the oppressive air of tension around us. It was with obvious effort that he and Pauline managed to carry the burden of conversation while we dined.

In view of the limited facilities and the brief time available for preparation of the food, we were served a remarkable feast. There were fish and fowl, several kinds of meats, hot breads, and a surprising assortment of vegetables and fruits. Some of them were unfamiliar to me. All were well prepared and beautifully served with handsome garnishes. However, I found I had no appetite. The tension around me and within me was too strong. I had to force myself to swallow even small samplings of various foods.

The others seemed to feel the same as I. Only Father John, hungry after his hard ride to Savage House, showed real enthusiasm for the meal.

Outside, the storm continued in its ferocity. Thunder roared and rumbled. Winds invaded the house and set the candle flames to whipping and flickering. The very bones of the old house creaked and groaned before the pounding of the tempest.

The persistent violence of the weather tore at Wesley's ragged nerves until his hands were shaking as he lifted fork or glass. Just as he reached for a piece of bread that a servant offered from a tray, thunder struck a shudder through the house. Wesley dropped the bread. Embarrassed, he started to mumble an apology for his clumsiness. He halted

abruptly in mid-word, his expression suddenly one of complete astonishment.

He was staring toward the doorway. We all followed his gaze to discover what had startled him so.

Standing framed in the doorway, one shoulder braced heavily against the jamb, was Captain Savage.

He seemed an apparition there, clad in the tarnished, weather-stained uniform he had worn on the deck of *The Savage Queen*. The clothing was now too large for his shrunken body. His coat hung loosely from his shoulders. His collarless shirt was open. His trousers bagged, sagging over his carpet slippers. His face was ashen and drawn, showing the strain of the effort it had taken for him to manage to dress himself and come down the stairs unassisted. Against his pallor, the raging vitality in his eyes was shockingly vivid.

For a moment, we were all frozen at the sight of him.

He looked at me. A shiver ran through me, as if a slurry of ice flooded my veins. Again, I had the feeling that it was his powerful will directing my life. I felt helpless before his eyes.

Bram broke the awed silence. Leaping from his chair, he hurried to the old man's side. "Sir, you shouldn't be up!"

"Got to," the captain grumbled, his voice as raw as the wind that howled outside the house. "Got to see to the wedding."

Pauline grasped at her lost composure. Stiffly, she said, "There is to be no wedding! I'll get the servants to carry you back to bed!"

"The hell you will!" the captain snapped. Accepting the support that Bram offered him, he worked the one arm he could control over Bram's shoulder.

Bram gestured as if to take the frail old man into his arms. "I'll help you back to bed, sir."

"The hell!" The captain's will was far stronger than his body. It gave strength to his voice. "Get me to a chair. I've come here to tie the knot and I won't be berthed again until it's done!"

Bram looked at him with dismay but obediently maneuvered him to a chair and seated him in it. With a sigh, the captain scanned us all. We were all staring at him. He fixed on the priest. "Who be you? Is that the cloth of the church you wear?"

"Uh—I'm Father John, missionary to the Indians on these islands," the young priest replied, cowed by the captain.

"Ah! Then you've come here to perform the ceremony!"

"Yes!" Wesley interrupted before Father John could explain the real reason for his presence in Savage House.

I realized that the captain had not been told of his daughter's illness. Wesley was trying to forestall any mention the priest might make of Jennifer's condition. His eyes implored Father John to understand.

Bewildered, the priest looked to the others about him to speak.

Pauline said firmly, "There is not going to be any wedding."

"Belay, woman!" the captain growled at her. He asked Wesley, "When is it to be?"

Uncertain how to reply, Wesley caught my hand and gripped it tightly.

I spoke up. "We were hoping that Father John would perform the ceremony tomorrow, before he leaves us to go back to the Indian village."

For an instant, Pauline looked aghast. Quickly collecting herself, she said to the priest, "But that isn't possible. The betrothal hasn't even been announced yet."

"It's announced now," Captain Savage said.

Pauline hesitated. I sensed that the presence of the priest was holding rein on her. He was a stranger in Savage House. He would be a witness to whatever occurred this evening. She was reluctant to openly defy her husband in front of him.

Offering a sweet smile for Father John's approval, she said, "Very well then, it is announced. And the wedding shall follow in due time, according to proper custom and the decent practice of respectable people."

The priest nodded in agreement. He appeared relieved to have the decision I had put to him taken from him.

"Belay, woman!" Captain Savage said again. "We'll have the ceremony tonight."

Father John said, "But that isn't possible. It can't be done so soon. I have to interview the bride and groom and instruct them—"

"Nature will instruct them in what they need to know right now," the captain interrupted. "The rest will come in time. We'll have the wedding now."

Pauline rose in rage, but as she started to voice her arguments, Captain Savage stopped her with a glowering scowl that struck her like a physical blow. Flinching from it, she turned to Hugh. Silently, her eyes spoke her distress to him.

In reply, he shrugged.

She sunk back into her chair.

I should have been filled with triumphant joy at the thought that the wedding might take place so soon. After all, that was what I had worked and schemed for. But something within me cringed, wanting to scream out in protest that there should be no wedding. Something within me wanted to flee.

I looked at Bram.

He was standing stiffly by the captain's side like a servant at his master's call. His face was hard set, appearing as immobile as stone. He did not look at any of us but held his eyes fixed on the flames of a candelabrum, as if he had no part in what was occurring, and wanted none.

I could sense his contained anger that was like the radiant heat of a blazing fire.

He was loath to have me wed Wesley But he said nothing. One might have thought that he held his tongue because of his devotion to Captain Savage; because of unswerving loyalty stronger than his own desires. But I did not believe him capable of such emotions.

Pauline had once suggested that Bram wanted me to marry Wesley for some devious reason of his own. That was long ago. I was certain Bram now realized that I was no longer the pliable child he had lured from her home in Cuba. He must understand now that I presented a threat to his ambitions. He must know that, as Wesley's wife, I would fight him for control of the Savage fortune. It puzzled me that he did not offer his own protests and arguments to the captain.

As if he felt my gaze, or heard my thoughts, he turned his eyes from the flames to look at me. They seared with contempt as they met mine. Instantly, he turned them again to the flames.

That look jolted me. Contempt! Always contempt! I would teach him the meaning of contempt! I would show him my own contempt! Defiantly, I said, "We shall do as Captain Savage wishes! We shall be married now!"

Wesley's grip on my hand tightened in appreciation.

Pauline shot me a look of pure venomous hatred.

Hugh turned a snarling scowl on Wesley, who was taking what he considered to be his personal property.

The captain smiled. "Good girl!"

"*No*!" Pauline insisted, facing her husband. Their wills locked in invisible combat. Ill though he might be, he proved

the stronger. The slight shifting of her posture as she yielded gave the impression that she somehow shrank in stature before him.

"The wedding will take place immediately," he said with satisfaction.

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A strangeness overcame me as we arranged ourselves for the wedding ceremony. I felt as if I slept, as if I dreamed of preparing for an act in a play. A sense of total unreality wrapped itself around me like a muffling fog.

My mind, vague and numb, seemed no longer united with my body. I became a spectator, glimpsing the performance distantly, through a dim haze that distorted all I saw.

My limbs moved obediently to the orders that Captain Savage snapped out as if he were commanding from his quarterdeck. My body responded to the instructions that the young priest murmured with stammering hesitancy. I heard my vows spoken as if by someone far away. The words seemed to echo back from the walls of hatred and fear that surrounded me.

My blood was ice and my being trembled. The images before me blurred. I was caught, held as a fly in the web of a spider, stretched out across the vast sky in the cold, cold eternity between the stars. My mind writhed, trying to escape. My heart screamed, but the screams were silent.

I was alone. So terribly alone.

Darkness enfolded me.

I woke suddenly to the stark, bright light of morning streaming through a window. Wesley Savage lay sleeping at my side, his arms about me.

I was his bride.

I could remember the wedding only vaguely, as if it had been a dream. I could remember nothing of what had occurred after the ceremony.

Puzzled and confused, I felt that I could not face Wesley until I'd had time to collect myself. Moving cautiously so as not to awaken him, I worked free of his embrace and rose.

Never in all my life had I felt more desolate than I did that morning as I stood before a tall cheval mirror looking at my reflection.

Mrs. Wesley Savage.

There were no alternatives left to me now. I had made the final commitment to the role that I had chosen to play.

As I washed and donned a wrapper, I strengthened my will by recounting to myself all of the worst cruelties that I had

suffered because of the people of Savage House. In my mind, I relived those moments under the old oak when Bram Ainsley had kissed me, then cursed me. In my imagination I felt Hugh Marlin's terrible hands upon my helpless body, and his weight crushing into me, and the water closing over me as he abandoned me to the sea.

My loathing, and my lust for revenge, revived as I sat before the dresser mirror combing out my hair. I was deep in thought, formulating possible plans, when I realized another image shared the glass with mine. I did not know how long Wesley had been standing there behind me, gazing at me in silence.

I looked into the reflection of his face. His expression was one of unbridled adoration.

As our eyes met in the mirror, he almost blushed as if abashed at having been discovered staring. He stammered shyly, "You—you are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!"

Automatically I glanced at my own image. Masses of dark red-gold hair tumbled about my face and shoulders. Framed by the luxurious tresses, my features lost all suggestion of the stern sharpness that had been brought out by the severe hairdos I had been wearing. My freshly scrubbed skin glowed with warm translucence. My wrapper, open at the throat, revealed the graceful, flowing lines of my neck. The fabric draped gently over the unhindered fullness of my breasts.

He saw me now as he had not seen me before, bathed in the morning sunlight, my body full-blown under the revealing wrapper, my face undisguised, and my hair falling free in all its glory.

As he gazed at me, a frown wrinkled his brow. He said, "Last night the name you gave to the priest—the name you wed me by—*Laura Wickham*?"

Suddenly my mind filled with pieces of memory. Broken memories like images in a kaleidoscope. I saw the priest. Heard Captain Savage barking orders. Felt Wesley's hand clutching mine. Felt the hatred that had surrounded us as we knelt to take our vows.

I remembered the shock, as stark and startled as if I had spoken with the voice of thunder. My own name had crashed into the others like the striking of lightning in their midst.

Even the priest had been aware of their appalled surprise. He had paused, staring about him, dismay in his eyes, as if he looked upon a scene of utter destruction.

Then Captain Savage's voice had roared through the silence, demanding that he get on with it.

And when it was done, when Wesley took me into his arms to seal our vows with a kiss, I had glimpsed Bram Ainsley. I had seen the raging emotion in his eyes, so powerful that it had overwhelmed me.

I had fainted in Wesley's arms.

What had happened after that, I could not recall.

With a bemused innocence, Wesley was saying, "You have no idea how startled I was! Why didn't you tell me who you were? What happened to you then, when you were here before?"

Thinly, I said, "I was afraid."

"Afraid? Of what? Of whom?"

I could not tell him the truth. If he ever learned of his father's scheme to have me marry him it would shatter what little belief in himself he possessed. If I were to succeed in mastering the Savage fortune through him, I needed to build up his confidence, not destroy it.

If I admitted the assault that Hugh had committed, Wesley would have felt bound to avenge my honor. In a confrontation with Hugh, he would surely fail. I did not doubt that Hugh would take delight in the opportunity to rid himself and his mother of the obstacle that Wesley presented to their ambitions.

I answered him, "I was afraid of myself."

"What do you mean?"

"When I came here before, as you father's guest, I was already betrothed."

"To Mister Stuart?"

I had never spoken of my imaginary widowhood. I did not want to tell Wesley any more lies than necessary, and I could not tell him the truth. Lowering my lashes, I whispered, "I would prefer not to discuss it."

"Of course, my dear," he said sympathetically, thinking he had aroused memories that were painful for me.

Even as he offered me his sympathy, I could sense a slight withdrawal in him. A cautious retreat from emotion. I realized that he feared I might still cherish a very strong affection for the late Mr. Stuart. He was afraid of the competition he might face from a memory. Afraid of his own inability to overcome it.

I thought perhaps it would be well to lie to him to reassure him. "Wesley, darling, when I first came here and met you, I

knew that if I was to fulfill the vows of my betrothal, I had to leave quickly. I had to get away from you before—before I began to entertain improper feelings toward you."

"Me?" he said, astonished.

Again, I lowered my lashes. I put all of my skills as an actress into my performance. "But I could never forget you, Wesley. I could never forget what happened here on Savage Key. Once I was in a position to do so, I had to find a way to come back here."

Encouraged by my flattery, he took a step toward me. Tentatively, as if he feared I might object, he ventured to touch my hair. It was a very light touch that sent a shiver through me.

"Dearest," he said. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't know how you might feel. There could have been another woman. Or some men do not think well of widows. I didn't know whether you could ever return my feelings. I had to find out before I could speak up. You understand, don't you?"

Nodding, he twisted a strand of my hair gently between his fingers. I was watching his reflection in the mirror. He leaned toward me as if he meant to take a kiss from me. Then he drew back, still too shy to be so presumptuous.

"Wesley," I said.

"Yes?" His voice was edged with the huskiness of his passion for me.

"Would you be so kind as to brush out the back for me?" I held up the hairbrush.

"Oh, yes!" He took it from me as if I offered him a precious treasure. Beaming, he began to stroke it down my hair. He looked as if he considered doing this for me to be a rare and wonderful privilege.

As he worked the brush lovingly down my tresses, he said softly, "Even then . . ."

I lifted a questioning brow at his reflection.

With a bit of a self-conscious laugh, he admitted, "I loved you even then, Laura Wickham. You don't know how much I loved you From the very moment I saw you stepping out of the dinghy to help Bram bring father ashore. You were so beautiful. And—and it was so terrible when you disappeared! It tore my heart apart when we discovered that you were gone!"

"I had no choice," I murmured.

"What happened to you?" he asked. But before I could

frame a suitable reply, he continued, "We were all very frightened for you. We couldn't imagine what could have happened. Father posted a reward for information. We hired all the Indians from the village to search for you and spread word of the reward. Bram was out night and day in the skiff hunting through the keys for you. He was like a man possessed. He wouldn't eat. He wouldn't rest until—"

Until he had assured himself that I had not escaped the death Hugh intended for me, I thought bitterly.

Wesley's voice caught in his throat. He swallowed, then went on, "Until the Indians brought in the tatters of the gown you had been wearing. When they told us they'd found it washed up on a beach, we all thought you must have drowned. Pauline suggested that you had been walking in your sleep. I—I—you can't imagine how I felt! I never hated the sea more than I did when I believed it had taken you!"

"Poor Wesley!" I said. "Poor dear Wesley! If only things could have been different!"

Impulsively, he pressed his face to my hair. He nuzzled at my neck, then jerked sharply away as if he felt he had taken an appalling liberty.

I gave a warm smile to his reflection in the mirror.

Returning it, he said, "I am the most fortunate man in all the world!"

"You are no more fortunate than I," I responded.

The irony of my thought was not to be heard in my voice. He took my words as he had meant his. He believed them to be a statement of love.

"I want to do things for you," he told me eagerly. "I want to give you things. Beautiful clothes and jewelry. Lovely ornaments for your hair." He caressed a tress lovingly. "You should have all kinds of fine things. Satins and silks. Diamonds and pearls. I want to give them to you. I can, you know. We're really very rich. I want to give you the finest things from the finest shops in the world!"

I reached up, taking his hand into mine. "All that I want is here on Savage Key."

He beamed, then shook his head. The familiar wistfulness came into his eyes again. "No, the things you should have can't be found here. You'll have to go to a city for them. I wish that I could go with you. But—I can give you letters of credit. As much as you want. You can go when *The Savage Star* calls here again, bound for New Orleans. Would you like that?"

I was not concerned with fine clothes and jewels. I had far larger ambitions. My mind leaped at the chance to turn our talk in a direction that might be useful for my private purposes.

I said, "*The Savage Star*? Isn't that the vessel Mister Ainsley commands?"

"Yes. And you must be careful about that."

"What?"

"Bram's title. He's *Captain* Ainsley now, you know, and rather proud of it. He'd be put out to hear you refer to him as *Mister* Ainsley."

"I would prefer not to sail with *Captain* Ainsley," I said.

"Why not?" he asked, puzzled.

"He frightens me."

"What on earth! What do you mean?"

"Those terrible accusations your sister made about that morning when I was so faint and Captain Ainsley helped me to my room. I—if your sister hadn't come calling him when she did, I fear what might have happened!"

"Not Bram!" he protested. "You don't have anything to fear from him."

"Are you certain?" I put a sharp edge of skepticism into my voice. "Believe me, dearest, a woman can sense these things."

"You must be mistaken."

"Is his poor wife mistaken?"

"Jennifer? What about Jennifer?"

"Haven't you seen how she doubts his loyalty to her? Haven't you noticed how much she worries when he's away? She knows very well what people say about sailors, about the women in every port."

"Not Bram."

I went on, "You saw how concerned she was to have his assurances of fidelity. You saw her run out into the rain to meet him when he arrived here. Would she have done such a foolish thing if she weren't terribly worried?"

"Bram and Jennifer love each other. I know they do. They have a beautiful son. They're a very happy family. I can't believe that Bram would be unfaithful to her."

"Jennifer seems to believe that he is." I held my eyes steady on the reflection of his in the mirror. The expression I shaped was one of deep concern. "That's what caused her present seizure, isn't it? The way she ran out into the rain to meet him aggravated her illness, didn't it?"

He gave a slight reluctant nod.

"If I were in her position, I'd be fearful, too," I said.

He lifted a brow in question.

"I'd be very concerned that he might have married me simply to establish his position in the Savage family and secure his command of *The Savage Star*."

"No!" he insisted. "No, darling, Bram is ambitious, but he's honest! He would never deceive Jennifer. Not in such a detestable way!"

There was bitterness in my tone. "You know him so well that you can know his innermost thoughts? You can be so positive that all the while he is away from her, he remains true to your sister?"

Wesley hadn't the strength of will to resist the doubts that I was forcing on him. Although he nodded in reply, I could sense his beginning uncertainty.

"Well, you know him far better than I do," I said. "But speaking as a woman, I would dread being alone with him in some dark place."

"You're mistaken about him," he muttered, fighting to maintain his convictions about the man he obviously held a deep respect for.

I had succeeded in shaking his faith in Bram. I was certain the doubts I had planted would grow. Assuming an air of guilelessness, I said, "In any case, I think it would ease Jennifer's mind and benefit her health if he were to stay with her instead of forever sailing off, leaving her alone here."

"He wanted to take her with him on *The Star*. Have her live aboard with him," he told me. "But her weakness of constitution wouldn't permit it."

"Then he should have given up *The Star* and come to stay ashore with her."

"He couldn't do that. *The Savage Star* is his life. He'd be lost on the beach."

I contained my inward smile. Carefully keeping any trace of my true emotion from my voice, I said, "Then he loves the ship more than he loves your sister?"

"I wouldn't say that. I think it's something that has him in its grip. Something that he can't control, for all his strength and will. He could no more give up his command than—" He paused, hunting a comparison. The one he chose was painful to him. "Than I could sail away from Savage Key."

My heart was pounding fiercely. My throat was taut as I made the next move in my scheme. I suggested, "But he

wouldn't have any choice in the matter if his command were taken from him, would he?"

"Father would never take *The Savage Star* away from Bram," he replied, and I could sense his envy of the fond affection that Captain Savage felt for Bram Ainsley. Wesley was well aware that Bram had taken the place on the quarterdeck that the captain had once dreamed of giving to his own son. His wistful yearning, his wish that he could have fulfilled his father's desires for him, filled his eyes.

I turned from the mirror to look directly at him. "But it would not be your father's decison. It would be yours."

"*Mine*!" He was startled by the thought.

"Your father is quite ill. While he's incapacitated, you are the rightful manager of the Savage ships, aren't you?"

He did not reply.

I added, "And the head of this family, too. It isn't just your *right*, Wesley. It's your *duty!* As Captain Savage's son and heir, you have an obligation to see to the well-being of the family and the business."

It was obvious that the idea awed and frightened him. He started to speak. Hesitated. Said nothing.

I gave his hand a squeeze of assurance. "You have been operating the business since your father was taken ill, haven't you?"

"I —uh—Pauline and Hugh—they've been doing most of it."

I knew he meant that they made all the decisions. He simply kept the books.

"What have they to do with your father's business? Pauline may have dower rights, but nothing more. She is not entitled to any authority beyond the management of the household. And Hugh isn't even a blood relation. He has no rights at all in the family or the business, except for those that *you* allow him to exercise."

I was aware that during the many long years of being completely dominated by Hugh and Pauline, Wesley had come to think of himself as Hugh's inferior. He had accepted a subordinate position because of his lack of confidence in himself. It confused and distressed him to think of himself as rightfully holding power over Hugh and Pauline.

I had to maneuver him into accepting that power. And using it.

I said, "You have to think of Jennifer's welfare. It's your duty to do what's best for her."

"I—I suppose so," he said weakly. Then he gave a shake of his head. "I don't think—even if I were to relieve Bram of his command, he would never stay ashore. He's a very good seaman. He could easily find another ship with some other company."

"If he truly loves Jennifer, he'll be willing to give up the sea for her."

"But the sea is his life! You've no idea how hard he's worked to achieve his present position!"

I arched a brow at him. "Then you feel that he would rather lose his wife than his place as a ship's master?"

"No!" he replied, but it was obvious he was troubled now by that very thought.

I pressed on. "If he doesn't truly love her, if he did marry her for no other reason than to get command of *The Savage Star* and establish himself in your family, wouldn't it be best if you found it out now? For Jennifer's sake?"

For a long, thoughtful moment he was silent. The decision was a very difficult one for him. At last, he spoke. "I suppose so."

It was with great effort that I contained the emotion that swelled within me. I had to struggle to keep my voice level and calm. "Then you will relieve Captain Ainsley of his command of *The Savage Star*?"

Slowly, grimly, he nodded.

I had to turn my face away from him. I could not quite manage to suppress my cold, smug smile of triumph.

36

I wanted to be with Wesley when he confronted Bram. It was not only a matter of lending Wesley the strength and encouragement of my presence, which I was certain he would need, I also wanted to savor the moment of my vengeful victory over Bram Ainsley.

In preparation, I dressed with great care. I picked one of the more attractive gowns that I had brought with me to Savage Key. It was simple in cut, made of cerulean faille. The color emphasized the alabaster glow of my complexion and the golden glints in my hair.

I eased the laces of my corset to free the fullness of my body. After I had donned the dress, I added a draped sash that emphasized my figure.

I worked my hair into a suggestion of a pompadour, with enough fullness at my temples to give my face a flattering frame. At the back, I pinned it in loose tresses and twisted the natural waves into soft, full curls.

The jewelry I chose was tasteful filigree work in the color of gold. The lavaliere was set with a well-carved agate cameo. The delicate profile upon it was much like my own.

I emerged from my cocoon.

Wesley's eyes sparkled with pride as he beheld me. I was aware that he could hardly believe his good fortune in having won such a lovely bride. Presenting myself to him, I knew his sense of possession would strengthen his confidence in himself.

We held hands as we went to find Bram.

He was not with Jennifer. The maid who attended her told us he had gone downstairs for some air.

We found him on the veranda.

The storm of the previous day had passed completely. The morning was bright, the Gulf sparkling under the sun, and the air was filled with the chattering bird-song that was a continuous accompaniment to daily life on Savage Key.

The brilliance of the sky almost silhouetted Bram as he stood at the railing of the veranda. His back was to the house as he gazed out to sea. He seemed as if he might be searching the horizon for return of *The Savage Star*. Searching for a part of his being.

A strange pang raced through me as I beheld him there. Never had I been more aware of the appealing broadness of his shoulders and the strong, lean, muscular grace of his body. Never had I yearned more for his arms about me. If at that moment he had turned and offered them to me, I felt I might willingly have forgiven him all his faults and fallen joyfully into his embrace.

I gave myself a stern silent reprimand for my weakness. I told myself that my passion for Bram Ainsley was a foolish, dangerous lust of the body that had to be overcome. It was a kind of madness, and I must not let it affect my judgment.

Surely Bram Ainsley was as much my enemy as Hugh Marlin. Hadn't Bram lured me away from my comfortable home and secure future in Cuba with subterfuge and deceit? Hadn't he thrown me into this den of evil that was Savage House, without regard to my own feelings and personal safety? Hadn't he simply used me to achieve his own ends?

And now, didn't he deceive and misuse poor Jennifer the same ruthless way to further his ambitions?

If it had not been for his callous mistreatment of me, I would not be on Savage Key seeking revenge.

The bitter memories that I revived turned the flame of my desire to burning anger.

As if he could feel the sear of hatred in my gaze, Bram turned toward us.

Wesley greeted him hesitantly.

I sensed that Wesley's will was weakening. Tightening my hand on his to reassure him, I spoke to Bram. "Are you watching for *The Savage Star*, Captain Ainsley?"

Wesley caught the subtle implication in my question. He knew that I was really asking if Bram was eager to be away from Savage Key and his loving wife. I felt the pressure of my hand returned as Wesley braced himself for the confrontation.

Although Bram did not understand my implication, he obviously realized that my question had hidden meaning. He lifted a brow at me. "Are you particularly interested in the return of *The Savage Star*, Mrs. Savage?"

There was a sharp bitterness in the way he spoke my new name.

Haughtily, I replied, "My husband's ships certainly are of interest to me. As are all of his concerns."

Bram glanced at Wesley.

I squeezed Wesley's hand, silently urging him to speak up.

He cleared his throat. "Uh—how is Jennifer this morning?"

"She's asleep now. She rested well last night. I think the crisis is past."

"And now you're in a hurry to be off to sea again?" I said.

The way Bram stood, with his back to the brilliant sky, it was difficult for me to see his features clearly. But I did not need to look deeply into his eyes to know the contempt that filled them. I could feel it striking into me.

Wesley stammered, "I—uh—I've been thinking a lot about Jen. I think she needs you with her."

"I've been with her all night."

"I don't mean –I mean—I—Bram, when *The Savage Star* returns, I'm giving command of her over to Mister DeCourso permanently."

"*The Savage Star* is my ship," Bram said, as if it were a fact determined at creation, as immutable as all the laws of nature.

His calmness, his air of absolute self-possession enraged me. Defiantly, I snapped. "She's not *yours!* She doesn't belong to you! *The Savage Star* and all the Savage ships belong to my husband! So does this island and everything on it!"

Bram's eyes narrowed. His voice was taut. "Jennifer doesn't belong to him."

Struggling to maintain his strength of will, Wesley found a rare anger within himself. He met Bram's eyes. "Jennifer is my sister! I love her! I care what happens to her!"

"Are you saying that I don't care?" Bram growled.

"I'm giving you the opportunity to prove that you do care! Show her you care by staying with her!"

"I can't stay. I have a ship to—"

"You *had* a ship!" Wesley interrupted. His nervousness, the tensions and conflicts within him, gave a hysterical edge to his anger. His voice rose sharply, his words tumbling over each other. "As of this moment, I am relieving you of your command, *Mister* Ainsley! You can stay here with your wife or you can go do whatever you damned please! You can abandon Jennifer if you care more for the sea than you do for her! But you won't go on using my sister just as a means to insinuate yourself into my father's business!"

"Oh God, I never—," Bram began with anguish. He stopped short and looked at me with such wild tiger-eyes that I cringed. "This is your doing!"

I had to struggle to maintain my own courage before the

ferocity of his emotion. I could not quite meet his gaze. Drawing upon all the strength of my passion for revenge, I managed to shape my mouth into a sweetly poisonous smile such as Pauline often affected. "Why, it's Wesley's decision! Isn't it, Wesley?"

My grip on his hand offered Wesley my encouragement and support. Clinging to my fingers as if he feared Bram's rage would tear him away from me, he gave a nod of agreement.

Bram paid him no heed but continued speaking directly to me. "You aren't master of The Savage Line yet! Not while Captain Savage is still alive!"

Wheeling from us, he stalked into the house. He slammed the door behind him.

For a brief moment, the vivid elation of victory flashed through me, as gloriously bright as a strike of lightning. But as quickly as the flare of lightning fades, my smug satisfaction disappeared.

I stood in a darkness of the soul, feeling cold and hollow, as if my very being had shriveled to dust.

A long time before, I had struck out at Bram Ainsley. Then, it had been with a razor, and I had drawn his blood. This time I had given him a cut more cruel and painful than that slash of a blade. This was a wound that might never heal.

A silent voice within me cried out that I must run after him. I must beg his forgiveness and somehow undo what I had done to him.

But I could not!

The icy despair of my remorse wrenched a shudder through me.

Aware of my shiver, Wesley asked with concern, "Is something wrong?"

"Hold me!" I moaned. "Warm me in your arms!"

He caught me into a loving embrace. I clung close against him, feeling the heat of his desire rising in his body.

But I did not find the warmth to thaw my icy misery.

How long we stood, his arms enfolding me while my soul wandered alone in the frozen darkness of despair, I did not know. But suddenly Bram was back. His face was drained of color and his eyes were strangely glazed. His voice was hardly more than a hoarse whisper as he addressed me.

"You've won. Captain Savage is dead."

37

Captain Garrick Savage passed away so quietly that the servant who kept watch by his door thought him to be asleep. Bram found him with a smile of peace on his face, as if he had left this life satisfied that his house was in order.

I had done the very thing that the captain had asked of me that night aboard *The Savage Queen* so long before. I had married his son. And I had every intention of fulfilling the captain's wish that I prevent Pauline and Hugh from seizing control of the fortune and business he had built. Yet, I felt pangs of guilt, as though I had deceived him on his deathbed in some way.

Despite all that had happened to me, I had been truly fond of Captain Savage. His death disturbed me deeply. Emotionally drained by the confrontation with Bram, and grieving for the captain, I failed to assert myself in the argument that ensued between Wesley and Pauline.

According to Wesley, his father had wanted to be buried at sea, in that same vast tomb that had claimed his first wife. Perversely, Pauline insisted that he be placed in the ground near Savage House. Father John, who had not yet left when the captain's death was discovered, agreed with Pauline.

Lacking support, Wesley gave way before Pauline's determination.

At the time, I did not understand why she felt so strongly about this matter. Later, I realized that she really cared nothing at all about where her husband's body was put to rest. She was simply demonstrating the strength of her position as mistress of the family and its fortune. And making one last symbolic gesture of defiance against the captain's will.

This was a victory I should not have allowed her to claim. Not without a fight. I should have challenged her right to make the family decisions then and there. I should have backed Wesley and forced him to refuse her. I should have seen this last wish of Captain Savage carried out. But I stood by, benumbed, as she took command.

She wanted to bury the captain that very day. There was no reason for a postponement of the burial, she said. There would be no visitors coming to view the body, no mourners, except the family, and no procession to a cemetery. The

priest was already at hand. She argued that he should not be delayed any longer than necessary at Savage House, while the Indians awaited his ministrations. And there were other considerations, such as the summer heat.

Her argument won, she ordered Wesley to oversee the digging of the grave. I later realized that this, too, was a symbolic action. Since Wesley was the one who had argued that his father should be buried at sea, she was proving her power over him by making him see to the preparation of the earthen grave himself.

I discovered just how much she had been anticipating her husband's death when I learned that she had a coffin ready and waiting for him in a storage shed, and widow's weeds hanging at hand in her armoire.

She'd had the proper full mourning costumes prepared for Henrietta and Jennifer, too, as well as hat crepes and armbands for the men. Since Jennifer was so ill, it was decided that she should not be informed of her father's demise until she was stronger. With a sarcastic sweetness, Pauline offered me the use of the mourning clothes that had been made up for Jennifer.

I was somewhat disturbed by this gesture which seemed so thoughtful and so unlike Pauline, but I failed to grasp its true significance at the time. Symbolically, she was putting me into Jennifer's place as a daughter in the household, subject to her mother's rule. If I had understood, I might have refused. But my feelings of guilt and grief made me feel that full mourning would be appropriate. I gratefully accepted.

While we women were dressing and the grave was being dug, servants prepared the captain's body. With unseemly haste, it was placed in the coffin and we gathered for the service.

The grave was shallow. One could not dig down more than a few feet on Savage Key before water rushed into the hole. Even this grave, barely deep enough to serve its purpose, had a puddle forming in the bottom as the coffin was lowered into it.

Watching, I thought that at least the captain would have the touch of the sea around him. I regretted not having argued against this grave. My failure to have done so added to my sense of guilt. In my sorrow, I felt a terrible loneliness. I yearned for strong, warm arms to enfold me and comfort me.

And I knew that I would not find the solace I longed for in my husband's arms.

Suddenly I realized that Bram Ainsley had not come to attend the service with us. His absence struck me as a vile insult to Captain Savage. I was outraged to think that now, when the captain could no longer be of use to him in his schemes for power, Bram was so inconsiderate as to refuse him at least a pretense of respect this one last time.

When the service was over and the men began to cover the coffin, Pauline suggested that we all take tea on the veranda with Father John before he left Savage House. The others acceded to her wishes. I slipped away to search for Bram. I meant to tell him exactly what I thought of the way he had abused Captain Savage's high regard for him.

Although the day was bright and sunny, when I strode angrily into the house, the long hallway seemed filled with ominous shadows. The stillness was so strong, so oppressive, that I automatically gathered my skirts to mute the rustling of the black taffeta and softened my steps.

I thought to look for Bram in the room he had been using while ashore. It was the one directly across the hall from Jennifer's bedroom. I felt it somehow ironic that he should be occupying the same room I had used when I was first on Savage Key. The room in which he had fallen victim to Pauline's wrath and accusations that he had attempted to assault me. And in which I had fallen victim to Pauline's sleeping powders and her son. How different would things be now if I had not argued in Bram's behalf then? I wondered. But it had been Captain Savage, and not my pleas, that had rescued Bram.

Now that Captain Savage was no longer under his influence, and he had been deprived of his command of *The Savage Star*, would Bram abandon his ambitions here? Perhaps at the very moment, he was packing his seabag preparatory to leaving his wife and son forever.

Or perhaps he would stay and fight for the power that he had striven so ruthlessly to achieve.

Desperately I hoped that he would go.

Out of my life.

Out of my dreams.

Yet I ached at the thought of never seeing him again.

A sudden noise from the direction of the library diverted me It sounded like the shattering of glass. I had just started up the stairs. I paused, looking back over my shoulder. Then, with a strange sense of apprehension, I turned to go investigate.

The library was empty. The door to Wesley's study stood ajar. From beyond it, I could hear faint sounds.

I thought perhaps Wesley had left the group on the veranda to seek seclusion in his grief for his father. If that were so, I did not want to interrupt him. Although he might welcome my consolation, I was too torn emotionally to play out my role with him.

Holding my skirts, I edged quietly to the door. As I leaned toward the opening, my nose wrinkled at the strong odor of brandy that came from the study. I nudged the door slightly and looked inside.

It was Bram Ainsley who sat at Wesley's desk. He was in his shirtsleeves. His discarded coat and vest lay in a rumpled heap on the end of the couch. He slumped with his elbows on the desk and his face pressed into his hands. His hair was dishevelled. His collar was missing and his shirt was open at the throat. He looked beaten, drained of strength, totally exhausted.

A surge of tenderness swelled through me. For an instant, my anger was gone, replaced by compassion and regret.

Then I noticed the brandy decanter sitting on the desk before him. It was half-empty. And there were shards of a broken glass lying in a puddle on the floor beside his chair.

I realized he was quite drunk.

Rage flared within me again. So this was how he honored the man who had given him the affection of a father for a son! In vulgar dissipation!

He was no better than Hugh Marlin!

No better!

I fought the urge to burst into tears. The urge to run away to some private place. To escape Savage Key and all upon it. I would not fail Captain Savage again. I would stand and fight anyone and everyone who would betray his trust.

Collecting myself, I prepared to vent my wrath upon Bram Ainsley. I reached out to open the door wide and confront him.

He lifted his head.

The motion froze me where I stood, hand outstretched.

He picked up the decanter. Holding it unsteadily, he glanced at the shards of glass on the floor. Then, crudely, he tilted the decanter to his mouth and drank from it. A drop of brandy trickled down his chin.

With wrenching effort, I broke the trance that held me and swung the door open wide.

He turned toward me. At the sight of me, he winced. Very deliberately, he set the decanter down, then wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. Slowly he rose from the chair and faced me.

When he stood up, he stepped in front of the window. He was silhouetted against the brightness of the sky beyond it. I could not see his expression. But there was a slump to the set of his shoulders and his voice was hollow as he spoke.

"Laura!"

Something in the way that he said my name sent a strange shiver through me. Again, my resolve weakened. My arms longed to reach out to him. The small, secret voice in my mind pleaded with me to beg his forgiveness.

No!

Once more I told myself that he was ruthless and cruel. He had used Captain Savage and Jennifer to his own ends. When the captain was dead and no longer of use to him, he had scorned attending the funeral. If he decided that his wife and son were no longer of use in his ambitious schemes, he would probably abandon them.

If I gave him the opportunity, he would undoubtedly use me as mercilessly as Hugh Marlin had.

I could not let myself yield to my foolish emotions.

The accusations that I intended to make were already formed in my thoughts. As I marshaled them, I set my face in a hard, narrow-eyed expression of complete disgust.

"I have some things to say to you, Mister Ainsley," I announced. My tone was as sharp as the crack of a whip.

His shoulders stiffened. His chin lifted. The look of arrogant pride returned to his stance. He took a slow step toward me. Then another.

His voice grated through his taut throat. "There isn't anything left to say."

As he moved away from the window, he ceased to be in silhouette to me. Light angled across his face, showing me his features.

My anger and intentions of censure were suddenly gone. I knew but one emotion.

Terror!

I saw the full fury of the jungle beast before me. The violence of the tiger burned in his eyes, no longer held in grim restraint by the force of his will. It was now unchained, raging with fiery passion.

He lunged at me.

I tried to run.

His hands caught me.

I tried to scream.

His mouth slammed against mine, shocking me with the pain of its demand, choking off my voice. The fire of his kiss burned through me. I was weak, trembling in his arms.

He released my mouth. The sour scent of brandy was on his breath, just as it had been on Hugh Marlin's that terrible night. His arms imprisoned me. I was helpless, just as I had been that night. Horrible memories leaped to life within my mind. Vividly, they mingled with my perceptions of the moment. I lived the past and the present at once. It was Bram Ainsley who held me, and it was Hugh Marlin. I was in the study at Savage House, and in the small, wave-tossed skiff on the Gulf.

The memories overwhelmed me. Dazed by panic, I was certain that it was Hugh Marlin whose face hovered so close over mine. I struggled against a fate that I sensed I was helpless to prevent.

Gasping, I tried to scream. I had no voice. Only rasping sobs came from my throat. My loathing gave the shape of words to my sobs. "I hate you! I hate you!"

"I know," he whispered softly.

And then his mouth was demanding mine again.

Desperately, I tried to break free as he shoved me toward the couch. I wrenched against the grip that held me as he flung me down onto it and threw himself upon me.

In my mind, it was Hugh Marlin's mouth that was smothering mine. It was Hugh Marlin's groping hand that jerked at my skirts. Ripped at my pantalets. Found my bare flesh.

I shuddered with horror at its probings. I hammered at him with my fists and tried to drive at him with my knees. He didn't even seem to feel the feeble blows.

His fingers were like flames licking at my body, searing my skin, setting my very bones ablaze. My flesh was ashes, my soul a cinder. The heat of his ardor was consuming my being.

My meager strength was exhausted. I could struggle no more. I was growing faint. Darkness, like the waters of the sea, closed in on me. I welcomed it, eager for the escape of oblivion.

As I slipped into limp stillness, his lips lifted from mine. His hands ceased their fierce attack. I felt myself suspended in space, knowing no sensation, as if time—even life—had stopped.

Strangely, I heard my name. It came to me like an echo carried on the wind, a call from some far distant place. It seemed to come from that eternity beyond the stars where ice and fire were one and all was emptiness.

The cry was filled with longing and loneliness and the pain of desperate desire. The voice was Bram Ainsley's. Not Hugh Marlin's, but Bram's. It called to me from the secret place of my deepest dreams. It pierced through the darkness that was engulfing me, drawing my wispy awareness away from the terrible memories that had overwhelmed me. It pulled me from the horrors of the past into the moment of my present existence. That moment that was in itself forever. It called me to the knowledge that the arms embracing me were Bram's.

Silently, my heart cried out in reply to the voice on the wind.

Although I did not—could not—speak, he understood. I knew that as he took my mouth, this time with a gentle reaching, a seeking that was not demand but that gave as it took.

The fierce rage of the jungle beast was gone from his touch. There was no more violent, impatient anger. His hands upon my flesh had a suddenly tender eagerness that filled my blood with sparks like myriad stars. In the brilliance, I had no wish to resist. This was my Bram who held me. Not the cruel and ruthless Bram Ainsley I had despised for so long, but the Bram I had dreamed him to be. Joyfully, I gave myself to the desire that swelled within me.

My breasts burned against his body. My arms trembled as they clung to him. My hands pressed ardently against the firm muscles of his back, feeling their rippling strength. With hungry anticipation, my mouth returned his kiss. My being pulsed to the beat of his heart. In its rhythm, my throbbing flesh answered the pounding quest of his passion.

I was totally possessed—and possessing.

I knew only my need of him, of the fulfillment of our beings merging into infinite unity.

Together we strove.

Sought.

Achieved.

Again and again, a joy beyond all my imaginings shivered through me. A joy enhanced beyond measure by my awareness that we shared it, Bram and I.

Together.

And then, when the all-consuming fire had burned itself into warm embers, we lay entwined in repose, drifting together in sweet, timeless mists of contentment.

Slowly, I sensed a wistful sadness. It grew into a painful sorrow, intruding into the peace of our private eternity. I was aware of it drawing tension into Bram. He stirred in my arms.

Lifting his cheek from mine, he spoke. Not with tenderness or renewed ardor, but with anguish, as if he were wrenched by hopeless despair.

"Laura, I love you!"

A sudden roar of viciously sarcastic laughter shattered my trance.

Bram leaped up.

To my horror, I saw Hugh Marlin standing in the doorway. His face was distorted in an evil leer. His eyes gleamed with delight at his discovery. Loudly, he called, "Wesley! Come here! Come see what I've found!"

My heart clenched within me as I thought of Wesley. My husband. Dear, gentle Wesley, whom I had betrayed.

"Laura!" Bram snapped. "Get out!"

I was on my feet, my hands automatically adjusting my rumpled skirts. Appalled, I stared at Hugh. He blocked the only doorway His smug sneer sent a shudder through me.

"The window!" Bram said.

He jumped for Hugh.

I saw the flash of surprise on Hugh's face. The sharp, startled panic in his eyes. And then Bram was upon him like a striking tiger.

Even as he flung himself onto Hugh, Bram was calling to me, "Laura! Go out through the window!"

I did not want to leave him. My every fiber cried out for me to stay at his side, to help him in his fight, to be with him always. But his words were a command that my instincts ordered me to obey.

The window was closed. I snatched it open and scrambled out onto the veranda. Automatically, I shoved it closed after me. Then I looked through it.

All of the restrained rage, all of the animal ferocity, that I had ever seen in Bram seemed unleashed upon Hugh Marlin. Bram had slammed into him and the two of them had tumbled to the floor. Now Bram was atop Hugh, fists smashing furiously at his face. He did not try to fight back, only to

escape Bram's blows. Desperately, he struggled to free himself from the wild violence of Bram's attack.

Hugh screamed. It was a shockingly thin, piercing scream, like the terrified squeal of a mouse caught in the claws of an eagle.

Bram cut it short, his hands closing over Hugh's throat.

"No!" I gasped at the dreadful thought that Bram might kill him. I had no care for Hugh Marlin. I wished him dead. But I feared for Bram. Feared what he might suffer if Hugh were to die at his hands.

I wanted to stop him. I wanted to protect him, to rush us both away from this accursed place to some safe haven where we might be together forever. But I was helpless. There was nothing I could do.

Nothing!

My anguished heart pounded like the rumbling of thunder. It seemed echoed in the running footsteps I heard. I stood appalled as I saw people rushing into the study, surrounding Bram and Hugh.

Pauline arrived first. At the sight of her son under Bram's choking hands, she began to scream. She clutched her hands to her head and screamed senselessly.

Wesley was immediately behind her, and Father John with him. They halted abruptly. I saw Wesley's horrified astonishment and confusion. I saw the priest's lips move as if he whispered a hurried prayer. Then he gestured for Wesley. The two of them grabbed at Bram, trying to pull him away from Hugh.

Even through the muffling glass of the closed window, I could hear them begging Bram to stop, to release Hugh.

He seemed deaf to their pleas. Blind to their presence. Unaware of their hands futilely trying to force him away from his victim.

Henrietta appeared in the doorway. As she saw her husband squirming under Bram's murderous grip, she began to wail.

Her cries seemed to break Pauline's trance. Suddenly, hissing like a cat, Pauline spun toward the desk. She snatched up the massive crystal brandy decanter.

And slammed it down onto Bram's head.

As the glass shattered, Bram collapsed.

I thought he was dead.

My scream was silent, my horror too terrible to give it voice.

I saw the expression on Pauline's face, filled with hatred for Bram, and with gloating hope that she had succeeded in killing him.

But she hadn't!

Although he lay as limp as if he were dead, I could see the faint motion of his back when his lungs drew breath.

Relief flooded through me. I almost plunged back into the room to rush to his side. Only some wondrous instinct held me where I stood long enough for the voice of reason to speak within my mind.

It told me that if I was ever to make amends to Bram, if I was ever to undo the cruelty that I had committed, and recover his command of *The Savage Star* for him, I must not jeopardize my position as Wesley Savage's wife. Only through Wesley could I possibly help Bram in a meaningful way.

I had to play a role. One more demanding than ever I had faced before.

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Clutching my skirts, I hurried along the veranda to enter the house by the front door. When I reached the study, the servants were there. They stood at the doorway, staring in awed silence.

I could hear Pauline shouting for someone to go get a doctor for Hugh. The servants exchanged glances. Diego shrugged and left. I pushed on into the study.

Pauline was seated on the floor with Hugh's head in her lap. She held him to her as he gasped noisily for breath. He was making strange gurgling sounds, as if something within his throat was broken. From the look of him he was barely conscious. To my great relief, I realized he was unable to speak. He could not yet have told anyone what he had seen or why Bram had attacked him.

Father John knelt on the floor, pressing a linen handkerchief to Bram's forehead. The cloth was stained with blood. The heavy glass decanter had cut Bram when it shattered. I silently prayed that the wound was not serious.

Henrietta had stopped wailing. Now she whimpered. Wesley held her, trying to calm her hysteria. His face was ashen, and his hands trembled at his own nervous confusion.

Gathering myself into the role I had to play, I approached him.

When he saw me, gratitude for my presence flashed in his troubled eyes. He reached out to me, wordlessly asking my strength in this situation that he could not comprehend.

I took his hand. "Wesley, what's happened? I heard such fearful noises!"

He gave a bewildered shrug. "I don't really know. It would appear that Bram attacked Hugh."

"That beast tried to kill my son!" Pauline snapped.

I widened my eyes as if astonished. "Why?"

She replied, "He's gone crazy! It's his bad blood! Bad blood always comes out! I warned Captain Savage about him! Time and again, I warned the captain, but he wouldn't listen to me! Now Ainsley's gone mad! Totally insane!"

Father John gave a slight nod of agreement.

Wesley tried to defend Bram. "It must have been the brandy. It looks as if he was drinking heavily. I believe fa-

ther's death had a deep effect on him. He was very fond of father. And after I dismissed him from his command, he—he—damn! I don't know! I just don't know!"

I allowed myself a glance at Bram. He lay so terribly still and looked so terribly pale that my heart cramped with compassion. It took all the willpower that I possessed to keep from rushing to his side. I could barely prevent my voice from quivering with distress. "Is he badly hurt?"

"I think not," Father John replied.

"He *should* be! He should be locked up! Hanged! He's insane!" There was so much loathing in Pauline's outcry that I almost cringed. She glanced around, glowering at us all, as if defying anyone to disagree. No one spoke. Collecting herself, she began to give orders. Now she shouted at Wesley and Father John, telling them to carry Hugh up to his bedroom.

"What about him?" Father John gave a nod toward Bram. "We can't just leave him lying there like that."

"No, we can't," Pauline said thoughtfully. A look of smug anticipation came into her eyes. Nodding slightly to herself, she turned to the servants. "Ramon, get Ainsley up to the room he's been occupying. Nita, run out to the stable. Find a padlock and a length of strong chain and fetch them up to Ainsley's bedroom."

Her tone sent a shiver along my spine. She meant to harm Bram. She meant to destroy him as thoroughly as ever I had intended.

I had to help him.

It was difficult for me to resist the powerful urge to attend Bram, but in the eyes of those around me, my place was with my husband. I followed Wesley and Father John as they carried Hugh up the stairs to his room. All the while, my heart was whispering prayers that I might somehow be able to undo the wrongs that I had caused for Bram, before Hugh could recover enough to speak.

Once Hugh was on the bed, Wesley left Pauline and the priest to make him comfortable. Mumbling that Ramon would need help, he hurried to the stairs. I went along with him.

Ramon was having difficulty handling Bram's unconscious bulk by himself. He had barely managed to drag Bram to the foot of the staircase when we reached him Between the two of them, he and Wesley were able to get Bram up to the bedroom.

Across the hall, Jennifer's door was closed. My thoughts

went to her. She lay seriously ill, unaware that her father had died and been buried. She knew nothing of what had happened to Bram.

I hated her for the vows she had received from Bram and for the fact that it was she, not I, who had given him his son. Yet I felt pity for her. She did love Bram. She would suffer because of his suffering. She would be an innocent victim of the evil that transpired in Savage House.

If only I had never returned to this place, I thought bitterly. Until I came back here, Bram's life had been good. He'd had what he wanted. He'd had a wife who loved him, and a beautiful son with the Savage blood, and he'd had command of *The Savage Star.*

I had taken his ship from him. I had driven him into the drunken fury that had been responsible for his attack on Hugh. Now he was in danger of losing his wife and son, and if Pauline had her way, his freedom, perhaps even his life.

What could I do? What could I do?

Bram was still limply unconscious as Wesley and Ramon put him onto the bed. The jarring of being carried had started the ugly gash on his forehead bleeding again. I grabbed a towel from the commode and pressed it to the wound.

Soon Pauline and Father John arrived. As she saw the tenderness with which I was caring for Bram's injury, Pauline's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Fearful that she might see my true feelings for Bram, I forced myself to leave his side.

Nita came in with the lock and chain that Pauline had called for. Taking them from her, Pauline wrapped the chain around Bram's ankle and locked it to the bedpost.

"He's had these fits before," she told the priest. "Why, once he actually *attacked* a young woman in this very house!"

She looked at me, challenging me to deny that Bram had actually assaulted me that night so long ago.

Since she had learned my true identity during the marriage ceremony, she had not spoken of that time when I was on Savage Key. She behaved as if she had forgotten my name, or did not recognize it. But I knew that she was well aware of my being the same woman whom Captain Savage had wanted as a wife for his son five years before.

I did not doubt that she had guessed I meant to battle her for control of the captain's fortune. I was certain that she would use any means possible to fight me. Whether she really believed I cared for Bram or not, if I dared to defend him

now, she would surely try to plant seeds of suspicion in Wesley's mind.

I had to contain myself and hold back the words that wished to rush from my lips.

Wesley started to speak, but Pauline interrupted him. "It was terrifying! He was like a wild beast! He had to be locked up then. I wanted to do something about him—send him to the authorities for proper attention—but by the following morning he gave the appearance of having come to his senses, and the others refused to let me take action."

Father John gave a solemn shake of his head.

She went on, "He's quite dangerous! Heaven alone knows what atrocities he's committed in other places! But there will be no more of it! No more! I'll see to that!"

"Sad. Very sad," the priest murmured. "Such a fine-looking young man."

"Bad blood," she said smugly. "It always tells. Come along. I've left poor Hugh alone too long already." She gestured for us to leave the room.

I couldn't simply walk out while Bram lay so pale, his head still bleeding. I caught Wesley's hand and squeezed it as I whispered to him, "He's hurt!"

Giving a nod of agreement, he said to Pauline, "Bram's injured. He needs attention."

"Nonsense! He's simply in a drunken stupor! It's Hugh who needs attention," she snapped.

I ventured, "He's bleeding."

She looked narrowly at me. With sarcastic sweetness, she said, "You seem so terribly concerned about him, perhaps you would like to stay by his side and attend his needs. Perhaps you would prefer this bedroom to that of your husband."

A chill shivered through my veins. Steadying myself, I started, "Surely one of the servants could—"

Pauline waved aside my suggestion. Again, she gestured for us to follow her from the room. Wesley yielded to her unspoken command. Still holding my hand, he stepped toward the door. Reluctantly, I went along. I told myself that I would return as soon as I could. But to my dismay, Pauline locked the bedroom door behind us and slipped the key into her pocket.

As she hurried toward Hugh's room, Wesley paused and caught Father John's attention. Soft-voiced, lest Pauline overhear and return to argue, he told the priest, "She's wrong

about Bram. That business of his having attacked a guest in this house, that was all a misunderstanding."

"Yes! A ridiculous foolish misunderstanding!" I agreed.

Wesley continued, "It was all explained at the time. I can't help but believe that what's happened here today involves some misunderstanding, too. Once Bram is conscious, he'll be able to explain. I'm certain of it."

"What I saw hardly appeared to be a misunderstanding," Father John replied stiffly. "It looked very much like Captain Ainsley meant to kill Mister Marlin."

"He'd been drinking," Wesley protested.

The priest gave a disapproving shake of his head. "Drunkenness itself is a sin. There is no excuse for it. And it is not excuse for violence against a fellow man. There can be no possible justification for what I beheld downstairs. None at all! If Mrs. Savage is in error when she says that Captain Ainsley is insane, then Captain Ainsley is a willful sinner and a would-be murderer and deserves punishment."

I looked imploringly at him. He had yielded to my pleas before and had vacillated about the correctness of performing the sudden marriage that I had asked for. But he seemed unshakable in his certainty now. If Pauline succeeded in having Bram accused and examined as insane, or brought up to trial for attempted murder, it appeared that the priest would be a very strong witness in her favor.

He had said his final word on the subject. Turning his back on Wesley and me, he followed Pauline to Hugh's room.

I was desperate for the opportunity to find my way to Bram's side again. Telling Wesley that I had developed a severe headache, I sought refuge in my bedroom. Wesley wanted to bring me a powder or tea, or anything I might ask.

I asked only to be left alone for a while. When he finally acceded to my wishes, I locked the door and considered the situation.

At the moment, I could see no way to mend the wrongs I had caused Bram. But at least I could care for his wound. I went to the window. Just below it was the roof of the veranda that ran around three sides of the house. Raccoons had scurried along it, peering into windows. And I had once crossed a roof to avoid a locked gate.

Remembering that night at *Roca Negra*, when I had traveled up and over the tiles of the roof with Bram, I began to remove my shoes and stockings. I had been in my bare feet then. I had managed not to fall. But then I'd had Bram's

strong hands to keep me secure. Now I would have to depend on my own determination.

I gathered my skirts and climbed through the window. With both hands pressed to the wall beside me, I took one cautious step, then another. The footing was not so difficult as I had feared it might be. Moving with care, I soon reached a window of the bedroom in which Bram was imprisoned.

Although the drapes were drawn, the windows were cracked open to allow a little circulation of air. I tugged at the sash. The old wood was warped. It did not want to move. With desperation, I braced myself and pulled. At last it yielded, and I slipped through the opening into the bedroom.

The musty shadows and silent stillness of the room chilled me. It had a quality about it like a tomb. Bram was as we had left him, lying on his back with his eyes closed and his arms limp at his sides. In the gloom, he appeared terribly like a corpse. The bloody wound on his forehead was visible as a dark stain against the pallor of his face. I could not tell that he breathed at all.

The dreadful thought that perhaps he did not breath overwhelmed me. I rushed to his side. No longer did I think of the contempt that I had seen so often in his eyes, or the ruthless ambition for which I had condemned him and hated him. Now I knew only my need of him and the hidden truth that I had found in his arms.

Bending over him, I saw a slight stirring of his chest. Relief flooded through me. He was breathing! He was alive!

I whispered tenderly, "Bram Ainsley, I love you!"

I had thought him still unconscious. But as I spoke, his eyes opened. His arms reached out to draw me to him. I entered them eagerly.

Holding me, his fingers entwining in my hair, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I murmured. "Oh, Bram, I've been so worried!"

"What did Hugh say?"

"Nothing. He's been insensible. He hasn't been able to speak yet."

He sighed. "Thank God!"

I pressed my cheek to his. "Bram! Oh, Bram, I love you so!"

As if he could not accept my words, he said softly, "You hate me."

"No! No, no, no!"

"You've always hated me." He seemed to be speaking from

the far distance of dark memories. "And I've always loved you. From the moment that I saw you there in your room that night in Havana oh, Laura, you don't know how much I wanted you! More than I ever wanted anything in all my life, I wanted you!"

A sense of guilt twisted within me like the blade of a knife. It seemed to demand that I deny myself that which I longed for most of all. I answered him, "That isn't love. That's lust."

"You think I don't know the difference? I can't say I never lusted for you. When I saw you there in that ball gown like some exquisite sculpture in alabaster and ivory and gold, I lusted for you. Any man would have. But what I felt was more than lust! Laura, I love my wife. My love for her is a candle flame that warms me. My love for you is a raging fire that consumes me! I *love* you, Laura Wickham! *I love you!*"

I envisioned his eyes as I had seen them that night, with the ferocity of the chained tiger blazing in them. Had that intense, restrained anger actually veiled a deep unspoken passion? Why hadn't he said something of his feelings? Why hadn't he given me some sign?

"If only I had known!" I moaned. "If only you'd told me!"

Bitterly, he replied, "How could I? Do you remember how you greeted me when you finally recognized me? How you greeted me every time we met? Do you remember how you called me *Rat?*"

But that had only been a reflexive reaction, I thought painfully. It was only a childish nickname uttered with the unconscious cruelty of an innocent child.

He continued, "You drew back with revulsion when I touched you."

My mind protested that it had not been revulsion, but fear. My fear of the strange emotions that his touch had aroused within me.

"You sneered at me and scorned me," he said. "And when I stole a kiss, you put a blade into me."

From fear, my thoughts cried silently. I had only been trying to defend myself.

He went on. "You did your best to turn Captain Savage against me. Even then, you were doing everything within your power to destroy me. How could I confess my love to you when it was so obvious that you despised me?"

"I was frightened! You were kidnapping me!"

"I was obeying my captain's orders."

Vivid memories shivered through me. I stammered, "D—did he order you to—to *rape* me?"

"What!"

"On board *The Savage Queen*, after you kissed me, when you locked me in your cabin and said that you'd be back, do you think I didn't realize what you intended? What you were coming back for!"

"Oh, God! I never—I was coming back to *apologize* to you! I had to get the vessel under way. As soon as I'd done it, I meant to see to your needs. To reassure you that you didn't have anything to fear while you were on board. To tell you how damned sorry I was about all that was happening to you. But you didn't give me a chance. You met me with a blade!"

It was true! All true! I knew that without a doubt, and I asked myself with dismay how I could have misunderstood him so!

"It all seemed very clear to me then," he went on. "To you, I was just the *Rat*. Just a damned tarry sailor, a filthy whore's son who Captain Savage had dragged out of a gutter. Even with my hands scrubbed, I wasn't fit to touch you!"

"No!" I moaned.

"I *thought* I understood." He gave a slow, bewildered shake of his head. "Now I don't. I don't understand anything at all. You're here, in my arms, but you're destroying me. Intentionally. More thoroughly than you ever could have done with that blade!"

"I was wrong! Terribly wrong! I never understood anything! Not you—not myself! I believed I hated you! Bram, you were so ruthless, so contemptuous and insolent! You meant to be master of *The Savage Star*, no matter what the cost! You were willing to kidnap me, to ruin my life, just to achieve your own ends—"

"I never meant you any harm!"

"All that ever seemed to matter to you was your own ambition! You even married Captain Savage's daughter to secure your position with him and assure yourself command of *The Savage Star*—"

"No!" he protested. But then he paused. Slowly, painfully, he admitted, "Yes, dammit, I wanted *The Savage Star!* I needed that ship to prove myself. To prove I was something more than a bilge rat who'd somehow gotten a little gold braid on his sleeve. I had to prove I could command a ship like *The Star*. I had to prove that I could command respect."

He drew breath and sighed as if weary with despair. "You may have been right when you said I wanted *The Star* more than I wanted Jennifer. Ever since that night when you said it to me, the thought has plagued me. If I had to choose between Jennifer and *The Star*—I don't know! I do love Jennifer! But—Laura—I love *you!* If you had—if ever I had thought that you could return my love, Laura, I would have given up *The Star* gladly for you. If you had wanted a bilge rat, I'd have thrown away my papers and my braid and gone to the fo'c'sle for you. If you had wanted a landlubber, I'd have gone on the beach for you. Can you make sense of it? Jennifer and my son and *The Savage Star* are my whole world. They're everything I've worked for and fought for. They're the proof that I am something more than just the damned whelp of a New Bedford whore. But I love you so much! It's like foundering in a hurricane, caught up on the rocks with the wind and the sea ripping at you from every direction, tearing you apart every moment of your life!"

At last I understood. At last I knew the fires that raged within him. The contempt I had seen so often in his eyes had not been for me, but for himself—for the way he thought I saw him. For the *Rat.*

I remembered his wretched condition when I first met him aboard *The Savage Queen* when we were both children. I remembered the vicious treatment he had received from the ship's cook. And with an agonizing pang of guilt, I recalled my own thoughtless, childish cruelties to him.

Overwhelmed with regret, with tender compassion and love, I bent my mouth to his. With my kiss, I told him all that mere words could not express.

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I returned to my room as I had come, over the roof. My eyes still burned from the tears that I had shed, and my dress was in ill repair. I washed my face and changed clothing.

As I was combing my hair, there was a tentative knock at the door.

I winced with guilty fear. Had Hugh recovered enough to speak? Catching a shuddering breath, I called, "Who is it?"

"Dolores, ma'am. It is—I—little Ricky is want much to see you, *por favor.*"

Dropping my comb, I hurried to unlock the door. Ricky was at Dolores' side. He rushed into my arms. As I hugged him to me, he said plaintively, "Is my Daddy gone on his ship?"

Dolores looked at me with distress. "I am not know how to say to him. It is so terrible what is happen."

I nodded. Apparently she knew nothing of my involvement. I asked if she had any news of Hugh's condition.

"He is still very sick, ma'am."

"Has the doctor come yet?"

"No. But Father John think he is not be die. Father John is go back to the village now."

"Is my daddy gone?" Ricky interrupted in an insistent whine.

I was loath to lie to the child, but I certainly could not tell him the truth. I replied, "Yes, dear."

He sniffled. "Daddy didn't say goodbye to me!"

"He wanted me to say it for him!" As I kissed the boy's cheek, my soul writhed within me. How could I ever make amends to him for the disaster that I had caused his family! When he learned the truth, would he ever be able to forgive me?

My kiss was but small comfort to him. He whimpered, "Daddy's gone!"

Aware of his need for love and assurance, Dolores said, "I think it is good he go to his mother before he have the nap."

"I'll take him to her," I suggested impulsively.

I wondered at myself as I led Ricky to his mother's room.

I did not want to face Jennifer, yet I felt oddly impelled to see her.

To my surprise, I found her unattended. She lay awake, looking very fragile and forlorn in the big bed. Her face was shockingly pale, and her eyes seemed misty as she greeted me. They brightened with joy when she saw Ricky at my side.

"Mama!" Ricky cried, squirming eagerly onto the bed.

I watched wistfully as Jennifer hugged her son. She was Bram's lawful wife, the mother of his child. All that I wanted from life, all that mattered to me now, had been hers.

Yet despite my jealousy, I felt kindly toward her. She had given Bram the son he loved so dearly. With her, he had known happiness.

Holding Ricky in her arms, she looked solemnly at me. "Terrible things have been happening in this house today, and no one has brought me news of them."

I could not deny the things that had happened. But I was afraid that she was too weak to bear the news. I did not reply.

With quiet calm, she said, "My father has died, hasn't he?"

Reluctantly, I nodded.

"Yes, I knew it." Her voice was distant, as if she spoke from a dream. "I heard him calling me."

She was mistaken, I thought. Captain Savage had not cried out. He had died peacefully in his sleep.

She went on in the same eerie way. "He's waiting for me now. We'll sail together on tomorrow's tide. On *The Savage Star*. Will you please tell Bram that I'm sorry I couldn't wait for him? Tell him he'll have other ships. Finer ships than *The Star*."

Her tone sent a shiver down my spine. She must be feverish, I decided, although her delicate features showed none of the ruddiness of fever. I thought that when the doctor arrived for Hugh, I would have to make certain that he visited Jennifer as well.

"Shush," I told her. "You've got to rest."

She smiled with sympathy for my concern. "Don't worry. Everything will be all right. Please remember to tell Bram that there will be other ships. Please take care of him for me."

Troubled by her tone, Ricky begged, "Mama, hug me!"

"And Ricky, too," she said to me as she cuddled him against her breast. "Please take care of them both for me."

Her words and manner disturbed me deeply. I could not reply. I only nodded.

She kissed Ricky and told him to go with me.

He clung to her. "Mama sleepy?"

"Yes, dear. Very sleepy."

"Ricky's sleep," he said. "Ricky wants to sleep with Mama!"

"No, you can't this time. Go along now."

He obeyed reluctantly. As he slipped from the bed, I caught him up into my arms.

Giving me a small, wistful smile, Jennifer closed her eyes.

I stood there looking at her for a long moment. Her breathing grew shallow but continued with the slow regularity of normal sleep. A serenity came over her thin, fragile features that somehow eased my own tensions. I began to feel that perhaps she was correct. Perhaps everything would be all right. It might be possible to avert the disaster that threatened Bram.

If only I could find the way!

As I carried Ricky back to the nursery, he yawned and leaned his cheek drowsily against mine. It was past time for his afternoon nap. I tucked him into his trundle. He did not want to let me go. Despite the fearful impatience in me, I stayed beside him, letting him hold my hand until sleep had claimed him.

From the nursery, I hurried to Hugh's room. Pauline was by his bedside. When she saw me, she snapped, "Isn't the doctor here yet?"

I shook my head and looked at Hugh. He seemed to be in a dazed stupor, neither asleep nor awake. He was drawing breath with apparent difficulty.

I asked, "How is he?"

Anger and concern mingled in Pauline's voice as she told me, "Very seriously injured! I'm afraid that something is broken in his throat. His voice box, perhaps. I don't know if he will ever recover fully!"

"Oh!" I barely managed to turn my sigh of relief into a sound suggesting sympathy.

"Bram Ainsley will pay for this! He'll pay dearly, believe me!" she said. "I won't rest until he's in prison, or a madhouse! Or dead!"

Her vehemence was horrifying. I had to do something to help Bram, and do it quickly. Muttering that I hoped everything would be all right, I hurried from Hugh's room to

search for Wesley. I did not know what I would say or do when I found him, but I felt certain he was the only one who could help.

I thought it most likely he would be in his study. I was right.

The room had been set in order. Bram's coat and vest were gone from the couch. The shards of the glass he had broken and the remains of the smashed decanter had been swept up. Only the scent of the spilled brandy lingered.

Wesley was at the desk, bent over an open ledger, gazing intently into it. He looked as if he hoped to lose himself in his work. From the tension of his posture, I could tell that he was not succeeding.

When I knocked at the doorjamb, he flinched as if I had startled him from very deep thought. He looked at me, his eyes hollow and his face drawn. All the usual boyishness was gone from his appearance. The events of the day had obviously been a severe trial to him.

I saw the uncorked bottle and half-empty glass on the desk before him and realized that he had been hunting solace in brandy as well as in his books. The liquor affected him differently than it had Bram. There was no fire in him, no strength or anger. Just a deep weariness.

He rose and came to take my hands as if he reached out for support. "Laura! I'm so glad you've come down! I hope this means you feel better!"

I remembered the headache I had feigned, and nodded in reply. "Much better."

He looked so helpless, so needful, that I felt a touch of despair. It seemed unlikely that he would have the courage to aid Bram.

"Wesley," I said. "I've just been to see Jennifer."

"She's not—?" Fear that yet another disaster had overtaken the family darkened his eyes.

"She's resting now," I said, putting reassurance into my voice.

He sighed with relief.

"Have you thought about what all this is going to mean to her?" I asked him. "Do you know what it will do to her if Pauline charges Bram with attempting to murder Hugh?"

He nodded miserably.

"You've got to do something!"

"What can I do?"

"Stop her somehow!"

"How?"

"You're the master of Savage House now that your father is dead. She has nothing but a widow's rights. Threaten her! If she doesn't yield to your wishes, throw her out of the house, and her son with her—"

"God!" he groaned, taken aback at the very thought of defying Pauline in such a manner.

"Wesley, you *have* to do something!" I insisted, angered by his weakness. "Don't you care about Jennifer, lying up there all alone without—"

"Alone?" he interrupted.

"Alone! Not even a servant at her door to attend her needs. She could die the way that your father did, and no one would know until—"

"No!" Wheeling from me, he hurried through the library.

I raced after him.

The maid, Nita, was in the hallway, just stepping through the back door. She had a small kerchief-wrapped bundle in her hands. Wesley shouted at her. She halted and looked at him over her shoulder.

"Did you know that Ma'am Jennifer is all alone?" he demanded of her. His concern for his sister gave him more strength than I had expected. "Don't you know that you're supposed to be with her, looking after her? She should be attended at all times! Why aren't you with her?"

"I go to my people," she said, her dark face impassive.

"What?"

"I go to my people. The big wind be coming. Big sea. Indian people leave village. Leave Savage Key. Go up river, much inland to high places. I go with them now."

"Big wind? You mean a *hurricane*?" Wesley shivered as he spoke the word. His deep dread of such a storm seemed to drive every other thought from his mind. He stared aghast at Nita.

"*Si*," she replied with a solemn nod.

"No! No, you're wrong! There's not going to be any hurricane!"

"Big storm. Soon."

He glanced about frantically. The front door stood open. Beyond it, the sea was visible, glittering under the bright afternoon sun. Taking comfort from the sight, he steadied himself as he pointed toward it. "Look! There hasn't even been any rain this afternoon! There's not going to be any storm!"

"Birds all go away. Birds go to high places. Indian people go to high places. I go with them."

"You *can't* go! We need you here. Someone has to stay with Ma'am Jennifer. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded but insisted, "I go now."

He cast about for some argument that would keep her from deserting his sister. "Has Ma'am Pauline given you permission to go?"

Shaking her head, Nita told him, "No good to be ask Ma'am Pauline. She only be say stay here."

"If you leave without her permission, you know she'll dismiss you," he warned. "You won't be working in Savage House any longer. Someone else will have your place here. No work, no pay. You understand that?"

She shrugged. "Birds go. Indian people go. I go."

Turning her back to us, she walked away.

"You can't leave!" Wesley called after her. "You've got to help take care of Jennifer!"

She didn't reply. She didn't even look back. She just walked on out the door.

"Damn!" Wesley muttered.

Nita's air of absolute certainty disturbed me. I asked him, "Is there a possibility that she's right about the storm?"

"No! Of course not!" he snapped so sharply that I knew he needed to convince himself. "Come on, I'll show you!"

Grabbing my hand, he hurried me through the hall to the veranda. From the front steps, he waved a hand toward the Gulf and the sky over it.

The water was placid. The gentle rollers rippling across its surface sparkled under the brilliance of the sun. The vivid blue of the sky was marred only by a few of the thin, wispy, featherlike clouds called mares' tails.

"Does it look to you like there's going to be any storm?" he demanded.

"No," I replied, although I felt strangely as if something were amiss about the peaceful scene before me.

From the steps, the house blocked my view of the east. The afternoon rains had been coming from that direction. Freeing my hand from his, I went down into the yard and looked back.

He followed me.

As far as the eye could see, there were no thunderheads towering over the mainland, no dark masses of rain clouds lying low over the horizon, no signs of changing weather at all.

Gesturing at the sky, he said again, "See?"

I nodded.

As we walked back into the house, he told me, "In all the years that I've been on Savage Key, we've never had a *hurricane* hit here!"

I sensed that he was protesting the possibility that there ever might be one. He could not go on like this, always running from his fears and hiding from his responsibilities, I thought. If he couldn't even admit to himself that a storm as severe as a hurricane could strike Savage Key, he surely would never be able to stand up to Pauline in all her fury.

I said, "There must have been hurricanes here in the past. I understand it was a hurricane that closed the old channel."

He nodded reluctantly but still attempted to deny the storm by emphasizing how long ago it had occurred.

"According to the Indians, that was in the time of their ancestors. It was the last hurricane to hit here. Tia Rosa, the maid who attended me when I was a little boy, used to tell me about it. She was rather old then, and she could barely remember it herself. Most of what she told me, she'd heard from her own parents."

Surprised, I said, "Your maid used to tell you stories about storms?"

"She didn't want to. She knew how much they horrified me. But Pauline insisted. It was supposed to be good for me. To build my character, Pauline said." The shame he felt at his weakness shadowed his eyes.

I felt a stab of guilt at my own insistence on talking of a subject that was so painful to him. Sympathetically, I put my hand into his.

He grasped it with appreciation, then sighed. "It isn't fair to you!"

"What isn't?"

"You deserve better than a husband who cringes at the mere thought of a hurricane."

"It isn't your fault."

"It's a childish fear. I'm not a child. I *should* be able to overcome it." He wiped at the perspiration that gleamed on his upper lip, then added with self-contempt, "At the very least, I should be able to talk about it without breaking into a cold sweat."

"Do you want to try?" I asked hopefully.

His reply was a grim, silent nod. Leading me into the study, he went to the desk. The glass sitting next to the ledger

was about half full of brandy. He drank it down and poured more. Holding the glass so tightly that his knuckles appeared blanched white, he drew a deep breath.

Slowly, hesitantly, he began to speak. His voice quavered as he called up the vivid images that the old Indian woman had used to describe a terrible storm to a terrified child.

"Tía Rosa said it came suddenly, the skies bursting open to spill all their waters onto the land, and the winds hammering the trees until the palms bowed their heads in submission and the oaks groaned in torment. At the same time, the sea swallowed the water from the bay and drank the mangrove swamps dry. Then the sea spit out the water it had swallowed, all in one great wave that flooded the entire key. She said it swept away every trace of the village, and everyone who was still in it. The only ones who survived were the few who had gone to the Holy Place to pray."

"The *Holy Place?*" I asked curiously.

"The old Indian mounds behind the mangrove swamps." He gave a nod toward the mainland. "It's high ground back there."

I remembered that he had told me of the mounds before, the first time I was on Savage Key. "Is that where the villagers are going now?"

"No, those mounds have been abandoned for ages. No one goes there any more." His voice steadied as he left the subject of storms for that of local history. "When the Spanish priests came and converted the Indians to Christianity, they tore down the altars to the old gods and forbade the people to go to the old holy places. After a time, most of the Indians came to think of the mounds as something evil. The ones of the present generation cross themselves whenever anyone mentions the mounds."

"But you said that some of the Indians went there to pray when the hurricane struck the key?"

"That was a long time ago. Some of them still thought of the mounds as a holy place then. Tía Rosa's parents did. She was a devout Christian herself, but even so, she held the mounds in a kind of veneration. The young people now—hello?"

He looked past me into the library. I turned and saw Dolores coming timidly toward us. She carried a bundle similar to the one that Nita had been carrying when she left the house.

"Yes, Dolores?" Wesley asked.

Eyes downcast, she said shyly, "Excuse, *por favor*. Is important I speak to the ma'am. Yes?"

He looked suspiciously at the bundle. "You're not planning to leave, too?"

She nodded. "Much sign say big storm is be come. Ramon and I go inland with village people."

"You can't all go running off just because you think you've seen some omens," he told her. "There's not going to be any storm."

She obviously didn't believe him. Turning to me, she said, "You come, too? Bring children?"

Wesley answered her before I could. "No one is going anywhere! There isn't going to be any storm!"

She looked at me uncertainly. "You not come?"

Her concern touched me. I smiled appreciatively as I said, "No."

"Of course not!" Wesley snapped. "She's staying here!"

Dolores hesitated, her eyes filled with sadness. Tentatively, she suggested, "I take little Ricky with me? Take him to high place, he be safe, yes?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" The courage that Wesley had struggled so hard to achieve was deserting him. His voice rose in pitch, becoming almost frantic as he waved toward the door. "If you insist, go ahead and go! Get out of here with all your superstitious talk of big storms! Don't come back! You'll all be replaced! All of you! You'll never work in Savage House again! Do you hear?"

Cowed by his unusual outburst, Dolores darted one last, beseeching glance at me, then scurried away.

"Damn!" Wesley groaned. He was still holding the glass of brandy that he had poured. He took a long swallow, then suddenly flung the glass against the wall. It shattered with a crash.

"It's no use!" He was almost sobbing. "Everything's going to pieces! I can't do anything about it! Not anything at all!"

Despairing, he came into my arms. I fought my own despair as I comforted him. How could I possibly inspire him to the courage that he would need to stand up to Pauline?

How could I possibly undo the wrongs that I had done to Bram Ainsley?

40

Nightfall brought an eerie air of emptiness to Savage House. All of the servants were gone. Diego had not yet returned with the doctor, and I had begun to wonder if he, too, might have fled from the storm that the Indians feared.

Pauline remained in Hugh's room, refusing to leave his side. Henrietta had taken Charlotte into her bedroom with her and locked the door. She would not open it, even when I carried a supper tray to her. I had to leave it in the hallway. Wesley, emotionally exhausted, had fallen into a deep brandy-tinged sleep from which I made no attempt to wake him.

I prepared a supper tray and carried it up to Jennifer, taking little Ricky with me. She was awake when I entered the room, and seemed stronger than she had earlier, although she still had a vague, distracted manner about her that disturbed me. She was delighted to have Ricky join her for supper. I left him with her while I went to take food to Bram.

I tried asking Pauline for the key to the room in which Bram was imprisoned. She would not let me have it. Neither would she leave Hugh's side to go unlock the door and let me take a tray of food in to Bram. She didn't care whether he ate or not, or even died behind that locked door.

Again, I crept across the roof of the veranda and entered the front bedroom by the window. Bram reprimanded me for coming. He said that the roof was dangerous, and so was my presence in the room with him. If I were discovered there, my reputation and my position as Wesley's wife would be irreparably damaged. He insisted that I must not linger with him.

Reluctantly obedient, I left.

When I got back to Jennifer's room, I found Ricky asleep in his mother's arms. Her smile was warm and cherishing as she asked in a whisper if he might not stay the night with her.

It seemed a good idea. There was no one to watch over them except me. I disliked leaving either of them alone all night. It would be far easier for me if they were both in the same room. With Jennifer's consent, I spread a pallet for myself at the foot of her bed and spent the night there.

I awoke to a curiously still morning. Since coming to Savage Key, I had grown accustomed to the continual chatter of the birds. Its total absence was jarring. I didn't hear a single jay shriek or fish-crow caw. There was no cackling of flickers, no mourning of doves.

With a sense of apprehension, I rose to look out a window. The Gulf lay shimmering serenely under a silvery sky. The sun was dulled by a high, thin haze like a tangled veil across its face that gave it a nacre luster and put a ring around it. I knew such a ring was held to be a bad sign, but I could not remember why.

Both the beach and the sky were empty. No masses of laughing gulls patrolled. No scurrying sandpipers hurried ahead of the gently lapping waves. No solemn files of pelicans strung out over the water watching for prey.

There wasn't a hint of a breeze. It was as if the very earth itself held its breath in anticipation.

A feeling of loneliness, as if I were the only living being in the whole world, filled me. It was so strong that I went to the bed to assure myself that Ricky and Jennifer were all right.

The child lay in his mother's arms. Both were drawing the soft, slow breaths of sleep. Their expressions were of peaceful contentment.

Telling myself that my apprehensions were foolish, I arranged my attire and went downstairs.

As was common with many southern homes, the kitchen was in a separate building set a short distance from the main house. This kept the undesirable heat of cooking from permeating the house during hot weather and lessened the chance of an accidental fire spreading. I was crossing the yard toward the kitchen when a sudden sound startled me. A sound so strange that it sent a shiver down my spine.

I stood with my breath held, listening for the sound to come again.

It did. And this time, to my great relief, I recognized it. Not a ghostly trilling wail at all, but the neighing of a horse!

I realized that with the servants all gone, there was no one tending the poor animals. No one had given them their morning feed.

I headed for the stable.

It was a small outbuilding divided into a tackroom, a smithy shed with a forge in it, and four large box-stalls. The horses looked hungrily over the stall gates as I entered. They made eager sounds of greeting.

Their nickering and shuffling and the smell of their warm hides was pleasant reassurance that the world was not so empty of life as it seemed. I talked aloud to them while I doled scoops of grain from the bin into their feed buckets. I added water to the troughs and patted one friendly mare on the nose before going on to the kitchen to feed myself.

In my days as a traveling player, especially the lean days when we camped by roadsides, I had learned a great deal about the homey craft of preparing food. As adeptly as any kitchen maid, I got a good fire going in the big, iron range and set water to boil for tea.

I was in no mood to prepare the sort of large hot breakfast that was usual at Savage House, nor did I see any need for it. The pantry and the food safes held an ample supply of cold breads, preserves, jams, and honey. There was a cooked ham that already had a few slices gone from it wrapped in cheesecloth in a safe, and some spiced pickled meat put up in jars. While I waited for the tea water to boil, I set up a tray for Jennifer and Ricky.

Once the tea was brewing, I put out a plate for myself. I was nibbling at a biscuit with a bit of wild honey, still waiting for the tea to be ready, when Wesley came into the kitchen.

He had washed and shaved and donned fresh clothing, but even so, he had a thoroughly bedraggled look about him. His face was slack and haggard. His shoulders slumped. Under the influence of the brandy he had consumed the day before, he had slept deeply, but it appeared he had gotten little rest.

He did not meet my eyes. With mournful contrition, he said, "Laura, I'm sorry about yesterday! You don't know how sorry I am!"

Although I despised the weakness that was in him, I could not help but feel pity for his pain. Offering him a sympathetic smile, I said, "Please don't! This is a new day. A fresh new day to begin again."

He gave a shake of his head, and I could see the fear that haunted his eyes. "Not a very good day, I'm afraid."

I lifted my brows in question.

"The barometer is falling," he told me. "We may be in for a storm after all."

"A *hurricane!*" I gasped, thinking of the birds. The Indians had said they were going. Now they were gone. I had not heard one single bird call all morning.

"No!" he replied sharply. He seemed to speak to himself

more than to me. "Not a hurricane! Just a storm! We've had storms before! Just a storm!"

I understood the effort with which he denied his fear. I sensed that if I tried to force him to face it now, I would succeed only in shattering the tenuous control he was managing to maintain.

Saying nothing more of the weather, I suggested that he sit down. "The tea should be ready by now. I'll get you a cup. I didn't fix anything else. There isn't much to eat except biscuits and cold ham."

"I'm not hungry," he mumbled as he seated himself at the kitchen table. He set his elbows on it and sunk his chin morosely into his hands.

I poured the tea and drank a cup with him. When we were done, I finished setting up the tray for Jennifer and Ricky. Wesley was not willing to be left alone while I took it up to them. He insisted on going with me.

They were both awake when we arrived at the bedroom. Jennifer looked better than she had the day before and was cheerful, but she still had that strangely distracted air about her. She greeted her brother affectionately and asked me to take little Ricky away while she spoke to him in private.

With the boy in my keeping, I could not sneak into Bram's room. And after I returned Ricky to his mother's care, I found myself unable to escape Wesley. He was almost pleading when he asked me to keep him company while he worked on the accounts. He seemed so desperate for the comfort of my presence that I could not bring myself to deny it to him. I had no chance at all to take breakfast to Bram.

The barometer continued to fall. By mid-morning the weather was visibly changing. Shreds of gray cloud scurried across the sky. The tide was running out and the Gulf was churned by whippy little gusts of wind. Soon the scudding clouds had increased enough to obscure the sun, and the winds had risen to wail through the trees.

I was sitting on the couch in the study, my fingers fretting nervously at a piece of needlework, while Wesley bent over his books trying to distract his mind with work, when the slam of a door upstairs startled us both. We looked at each other in question as we heard Pauline's footsteps running through the hall above, then down the stairs.

I set aside my needlework and went out to see what was the matter. Wesley followed close behind me. We reached the

hall just in time to see Pauline dash out the front door. She ran across the veranda, down the steps, and into the yard.

When I reached the veranda, I saw the cause of her excitement. The skiff she had sent to get the doctor was skittering toward the pier, its short-set sails whipping in the wind. She ran out onto the pier to meet it.

Leaving Wesley on the veranda, I went after her. There was a fine mist of rain in the wind. Pinpoints of it stabbed into my face. Shielding my eyes with a hand, I watched the little boat struggle up to the end of the pier. Diego was alone in it.

Pauline shouted at him, but the wind tore her words away. I could not make them out until I was almost at her side. She was cursing Diego violently.

He spread his hands in a helpless gesture and turned to me with the apparent hope that I would be somewhat more understanding than Pauline.

"Doctor is no come here," he told me. "He is be wait for big storm. Say be much need for him in Punta Blanca, maybe, if storm strike there."

"Hugh *need*s him!" Pauline screeched. "You should have *forced* him to come!"

With a shrug, Diego went on speaking to me. "Indian people all go inland, be safe. I have take the wife and children of Diego to safe place. Now I come back, take you. *Si?*"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Pauline snapped at him.

He shrugged again. "Much late. Much need hurry. You no come, I go now."

"You'll do nothing of the sort! You'll go back to Punta Blanca and *make* the doctor come here!"

I suggested, "Perhaps it would be better to take Hugh to Punta Blanca."

Ignoring me, Pauline continued to rage at Diego.

I caught her attention by grabbing her arm. "I think that the Indians are right. There is going to be a storm."

"There are a lot of squalls at this time of the year!" she replied. "Common squalls that come and go in the blink of an eye!"

Diego said grimly, "Little storm grow big soon."

"Into a *hurricane!*" I added.

She started to reply but hesitated and looked around as if she saw the threat of the weather for the first time. As if protesting against nature, she said, "Hugh isn't well enough to travel!"

I was disgusted with her and far more concerned for the others than for Hugh. I said angrily, "You stay here with him if you wish! The rest of us will go with Diego! Give me the keys and I'll release Bram!"

She looked curiously at me. Her eyes were narrowed against the stinging rain. I thought that I glimpsed a strange glint under her lowered lids.

I realized that I had referred to Bram by his first name. That was a serious slip of the tongue. I was not supposed to be on such familiar terms with him. Had she caught my error? Did she suspect the truth? My heart pounded with fear as I tried to compose myself for the accusations I expected from her.

Slowly, thoughtfully, she said, "Yes, perhaps we had best leave Savage House."

A sigh of relief shuddered through me. I decided she must be too worried about Hugh to have noticed my mistake.

Turning from me, she beckoned for Diego. "Come along, I'll need help with Hugh. He's quite ill, you know."

As she hurried back to the house, I followed. She paused on the veranda to tell Wesley that we were leaving. As I caught up with her, she was saying viciously, "All except you, of course."

At her words, his face drained of color.

In my concern for Bram, I had momentarily forgotten poor Wesley's dread of the sea. Her cruelty to him took me aback. And his sudden sickly pallor sent a sharp pang of sympathy spearing through me. Compassionately, I grasped his hand.

Pauline turned to me. Her tone was sarcastically cloying as she said, "And you, my child? You *will* stay behind to face the deadly hurricane with your husband and share his unfortunate fate, won't you? Or would you prefer to desert him—to abandon him to the storm while you seek your own safety on the mainland—with Bram Ainsley to comfort you in your loss?"

I wince as she spoke Bram's name. She *had* noticed my slip of the tongue! She had guessed the truth!

She smiled nastily as the heat that flushed my cheeks confirmed her surmise. With her head held high in triumph, she led Diego on into the house.

I stood abashed before Wesley. He, too, had seen my betraying blush and had understood its significance. His hand,

holding mine, had a cold, clammy feel to it. His expression was strange. Unreadeable.

In a thin, hoarse whisper, he said, "I should have known. I should have realized it before this. Bram is the one you really love."

"I love you, Wesley!" I blurted, and I knew that it was ture. I did love him. Not with the kind of overwhelming passion that I felt for Bram, but with a warm tender affection that was quite real. Just such an affection as Bram must feel for Jennifer, I thought. I tightened my hand on Wesley's, trying to speak to him with my touch and with my eyes.

His wistful, appreciative smile told me that he understood far more than I would have imagined possible.

"Laura," he said. "In just the short time that we've had together, you've brought me more happiness than I ever dreamed possible." There was a terrible finality in the way he spoke.

He intended to stay on Savage Key through the storm, I thought. I said, "You *are* coming with us, Wesley!"

He gave a nod toward the skiff bobbing at the end of the pier. "In that small boat? It will barely hold eight people. There are ten of us. Someone has to stay behind."

I knew he was only offering an excuse. I protested, "Two are small children! There will be room enough for us all!"

He continued to smile wistfully as he shook his head.

I could sense that it was taking all the strength of will he possessed simply to fend off the hysteria that threatened him. He hadn't the ability to face a trip in the skiff.

"Then I won't go!" I told him. "I'll stay here with you! I won't leave you alone!"

He gazed at me. All of his love and need of me was revealed openly in his expression. Suddenly I saw a spark of courage flash in his eyes, and with it, a kind of calm came into his face. It appeared as if he had found a new well of strength within himself.

His voice steadied as he said, "Perhaps a little brandy might help prepare me for what must be done. Will you excuse me a moment, dearest?"

"You *will* come with us?" I said eagerly.

"Dear Laura! How could I ever part with you while there is still a single breath of life in my body?" he replied.

At this assurance, I felt a mingling of relief and sorrow. I cared very much for Wesley, yet my whole being longed for Bram Ainsley. But my love for Bram was futile. He was wed

to Jennifer, and I to Wesley. I had vowed to remain Wesley's faithful wife until death parted us.

I had already betrayed Wesley, and although the memory was sweet, the guilt I felt was bitter. I swore silently that I would not betray him again! Lifting my face toward him, I offered him a kiss.

He accepted it with a passion such as I had not known from him before. Then, releasing my hand, he wheeled away from me to head for the study.

I started after him.

As I stepped into the hallway, I saw Pauline and Diego coming down the stairs. They held Hugh between them, with his arms over their shoulders. Although he was on his feet, it was obvious that he was totally dependent on their support. His head lolled and he breathed in horrid gurgling gasps. I thought him barely conscious.

But he saw me and recognized me. Stiffening, he lifted his head enough to look directly into my face. The loathing in his eyes was so intense that I cringed before it.

His mouth worked, but his throat would not give him voice, and his struggle for breath distorted the motion of his lips, so that any recognition of the words that he tried to shape was impossible.

I could only guess that he cursed me.

I tried to stop Pauline and get the keys to release Bram, but she brushed me aside, muttering that she would be back as soon as Hugh was comfortable in the skiff.

Henrietta followed them down the stairs, dragging Charlotte by the hand. The poor child was terrified. Seeing me, she attempted to escape her mother's grip and run to me. Henrietta clung tightly to her. Eyes glazed and staring, refusing even to see me, Henrietta continued on after Pauline. She held her head high, carrying herself as proudly as a deposed queen on the way to the block. I tried to speak to her, but she would not hear me.

I realized that she was in some strange world of her own, some secret place within her mind where she took refuge from the events on Savage Key that she could not cope with. It was evident that she meant to force Charlotte into that world with her.

As they passed me, Charlotte begged me to come with them.

"Later," I said. "I'll come as soon as I can."

Her stricken face told me that she did not believe me.

Henrietta tugged her on down the hall and out of the house.

For a moment, I stood gazing after them in dismay. What had happened to Henrietta was bad enough. What was happening to Charlotte was even worse. The child needed help. She needed to get away from the madness that surrounded her into a happy wholesome environment where she might have the opportunity to grow into a normal woman.

Or was it too late for that even now? I wondered.

A sound like a crack of thunder broke my trance. It seemed to have come from within the house. I told myself it was only a door blown shut by the wind. But I knew that was not so. Wheeling, I raced to the study.

Wesley was in his chair. His head was resting on the desk. His face was turned toward me, its expression one of peaceful repose. One arm dangled. The fingers brushed the floor. By the fingertips lay a small pistol.

The bitter tang of gunsmoke stung my nostrils.

Slowly, with dreadful apprehension, I approached him. I saw the tiny hole in his temple, surrounded by a dark smudge of burnt powder. It oozed only a little blood. It hardly appeared enough of a wound to do serious injury.

My hand crept cautiously to his cheek. I could feel the warmth of life still in his flesh, yet I sensed that life itself had fled.

Wesley Savage would know no more of fear or pain.

As if a voice spoke to me from some far distance, I understood He had not done this solely to escape his own torment. He had done it to free me. He had known that I was sincere when I told him I would not leave him to face the hurricane alone. He would not let me stay and endanger myself on his account.

In death, he offered me life.

The voice in my mind told me that I must not pause to mourn for him. My immediate concern must be for the living. For the sister Wesley loved. For Bram and for little Ricky. I could not trust to Pauline to see to their well-being. I had to do it myself.

I bent and lightly kissed Wesley's lifeless cheek. Then, wiping at the tears that burned my eyes, I turned from him. Time was growing short. The house had begun to shudder under the pounding of the wind and rain. We had to be out of it soon, lest it collapse upon us.

In the hallway, I met Pauline. She had returned from the

skiff rain-soaked and disheveled, but radiating energy and fierce determination. The aura of excitement about her seemed almost exultant.

As we came face to face, I told her, "Wesley's dead! He's killed himself!"

"Dead?" She spoke the word as if she tested it, studying the subtle meanings of it, and the implications of Wesley's death in her own life.

Was she appalled by his death, or glad to have one less obstacle standing between her and the Savage fortune? I could not tell. The emotion that flashed in her eyes was hidden too quickly. Narrowly, she gazed toward me. She did not seem to be looking at me, but rather past me into her own thoughts.

A sense of forboding shivered through me. I demanded, "Give me the keys to free Bram!"

She focused on me then. "You get Jennifer and her child. I'll take care of Ainsley!"

She darted for the stairs. I hurried after her. At the door to her rooms, she halted and gasped breathlessly, "Go on, attend to Jennifer and the boy! Put warm clothing on them! Put something warm on yourself! I'll get the keys and take care of Ainsley!"

I was surprised by the note of urgency in her voice. She had never shown the least sign of affection for her daughter and grandson before. I wondered if perhaps the imminent danger and the shock of Wesley's unnatural death might have brought some long-buried maternal feeling to the surface in her.

If that were so, then perhaps when she realized how much Jennifer and little Ricky would suffer if Bram were prosecuted for attempting to kill Hugh, she would have mercy on him, I thought hopefully as I ran on to Jennifer's bedroom.

The door was closed. Opening it, I stepped inside. I started to speak. At the sight of Jennifer, my words froze in my throat.

She was lying limp, her eyes closed. The improving color and appearance of returning health that I had seen in her earlier were all gone. It was as if all her strength had been expended during those few moments of brightness and cheer that morning.

Her fragile features were as pale as the pillow that cushioned her head. Her cheeks were sunken and her skin had the look of aged parchment. One hand lay atop the coverlet, the slim fingers almost skeletal.

Ricky was alseep, nestled close against her side.

Although she appeared to have been sleeping, she must have heard me enter the room. She opened her eyes and offered me a faint smile.

Outside, the wind was gusting wildly. The old house shook. The door slammed shut behind me, sounding terribly like the gunshot that had taken Wesley's life. I choked back a sob.

"There's a storm," Jennifer said, her voice a weak, thin whisper.

I nodded. I could not speak. Not yet. I was too taut with memories of Wesley.

"It doesn't matter," she murmured. "*The Savage Star* is a steamer. She can run against any wind."

My heart sunk at the thought that she was gripped by fever again. I would have to take care that she was very well bundled against the storm.

Collecting myself, I asked, "Do you think you're strong enough to get dressed and go down to the pier?"

She did not reply, but said distantly, "Father's coming for me soon."

Our words awoke Ricky. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. I held my arms out to him. "Come on, Ricky. We're going for a ride in the skiff."

He glanced toward the windows. Although they were closed, the wind probed through the cracks, rippling the curtains and even stirring the heavy drapes. It flung rain against the panes. Sleepily, he asked, "In the storm?"

"It will be fun. Exciting," I told him.

"Will Daddy be there?"

"Yes."

Beaming with joy, he scrambled eagerly from the bed.

"Take care of him for me," Jennifer said. "And Bram. Take care of Bram for me."

"Bram will be here in a few minutes," I said as I turned to hunt through her wardrobe. I found a long, hooded cloak for her, and a blanket to wrap Ricky in. Putting them down on the foot of the bed, I offered her my hand and asked if she thought she could stand up with my help.

She did not move, but replied, "Father will help me when the time comes."

Her feverish lassitude chafed at my tattered nerves. My patience snapped. "You've got to get up now! You've got to get ready! We've got to hurry!"

"No. I'm not going with you. I'm going with father on *The Savage Star*. Wesley's going too."

Her reference to Wesley took me aback.

Distressed, Ricky whined, "I want to go with Mama!"

"You can't, dear," Jennifer told him. "You must go with your father and Ma'am Laura. You love Ma'am Laura, don't you?"

He gave a troubled little nod.

"You must go with her now. Stay with her. You can come to Mama later. Much later. Do you understand?"

He nodded again, from obedience rather than from comprehension. Slipping to my side, he grasped my hand.

Another fierce gust of wind shook the house. Its timbers groaned and creaked.

There was no time for me to argue with Jennifer and her feverish illusions, I thought. I had best humor her. I said, "Let me help you. We'll all go down to the pier and wait for *The Star* there."

She smiled as if she saw through my little lie. The smile was very wistful. Making no effort at all to rise, she said again, "Take care of Ricky and Bram for me."

I realized that my words were useless. I would have to have help with her. Bram could carry her down to the skiff. Where was he? Surely Pauline'd had time enough to release him by now. Surely he would not have left the house without Jennifer and Ricky.

Stepping to the door, I twisted the knob.

It would not turn!

I shuddered with horror as I understood. Pauline had locked us in.

I knew without a doubt that she had not released Bram. She was leaving us all—everyone who might stand between her and the Savage fortune—to die in the hurricane!

41

I stood at the front window staring through the dense, wind-whipped rain at the vague blur that I knew to be the skiff. Already, it had pulled away from the pier. Somehow Pauline had managed to make Diego leave without us. Perhaps she had used lies, perhaps force. It didn't matter. All that mattered now were the locks that held us imprisoned and the storm that threatened to destroy Savage House around us.

I knew it was useless to scream for help. Even if I could make myself heard above the roar of the storm, there was no one to hear. My entwined fingers twisted with despair. What could I do?

Ricky intruded on my thoughts. Tugging at my skirt for attention, he asked eagerly, "Do you see my Daddy's ship coming?"

His innocent hopeful voice stabbed through my gloom. The spark of spirit flared within me. I would not give in to the doom that Pauline intended for us all—not without a fight!

Bram would know what to do, I thought, as I seated myself and started pulling off my shoes.

Again, Ricky asked if his father's ship was coming.

"Not yet, but soon," I replied in a whisper. I did not want to disturb Jennifer. She lay resting with her eyes closed. I could not tell whether she slept or not, but she seemed content and unaware of our plight. I thought it best to leave her so.

Ricky watched curiously as I removed my shoes and stockings. He asked, "Are you going to bed?"

"No. I'm going to see your father."

"Can I go with you!"

"*May* I," I corrected automatically.

"May I?"

"Not now."

"Please! I want to see Daddy!"

I gestured at the window. "You don't want to get all wet!"

"I want to see Daddy!" he repeated.

"You wait here with your mother, I'll see if I can't bring your Daddy here to you." I strived to put more confidence into my voice than I felt. Bram was locked in the room across the hall, chained to the massive bed frame, and

Pauline would certainly have taken the keys with her. I had no idea how I might free him. I only hoped he would know what to do.

Plaintively, Ricky begged, "Will you come back with him real soon?"

This time I did not correct his grammar. I hugged him to me. My voice quavered. "I'll do the best I can, dear!"

He stood watching as I tugged at the window sash. The pounding of the storm shook it in my hands. As I forced it up, the wind blasted in. The rain that it carried drenched me. Ricky jumped back with a giggle.

I looked at him once more, then grasped the sill and dragged myself out through the window onto the roof of the veranda.

The winds snatched at me, slinging me up against the wall. The surface under me was precariously slick. The hammering rains were pouring water down faster than it could run off the roof's gentle slope. It swirled around my feet, tugging at them as if to sweep them from under me.

For a long moment, I could not move. I stood clinging to the window frame, my body pressed against the wall, my eyes clenched shut, and my heart pounding with desperation.

The image of Ricky was vivid in my mind.

I had to go on.

Drawing deep, determined breaths, I steadied myself. The wind was coming in gusts. As it eased, I groped out cautiously with one foot. I set it carefully, put my weight on it, then released the window frame and braced my hands against the wall. I stood poised there as another gust of wind slammed at me. Then I reached out with the other foot.

One step.

Then another.

Again and again, the wind slammed at me, halting me. As each gust eased, I moved on. Slowly, doggedly, always thinking of Ricky, I kept going.

Suddenly I felt my foot slipping. My hands grabbed instinctively for support. There was none. Nothing to catch and hold. My feet were sliding from under me. I fell heavily onto the roof. My fingers clawed futilely at its surface as I slid along on the water that rushed down its slick slope.

And then there was nothing under me.

I felt suspended in space. Time seemed to pause as I fell. Myriad thoughts burst into my mind. Most dreadful of them all was that I had failed. Now we were all lost!

I struck something. It yielded under my weight. Switches snatched and scratched at me. I hit ground amid the snapped branches of the bush that had broken my fall. Jarred breathless, I lay in the mud with the rain beating down on me. I felt numb, and totally helpless.

I needed Bram. I needed his advice to guide me and his strong arms to comfort me.

But he was a prisoner in Savage House, and I was lying outside in the mud. He could not help me unless I could reach him and help him.

The fall had dazed me and perhaps bruised me, but I was not injured. As I dragged myself to my feet, the wind gusted, trying to force me down again. I struggled against it. Clinging to the railing of the veranda, I managed to stand erect.

The gust eased. For the moment, the roar of the storm lessened. I became aware of a sound, a heavy thudding as if someone hammered repeatedly at a locked door. For an instant, I thought it must be Bram, but then I realized that the sound was coming from behind the house.

The thuds came too steadily, too regularly, to be made by some object banging in the wind. Could there be someone in the yard? It did not seem likely. Yet the noise continued.

Puzzled, I gathered my drenched skirts, holding the hems high above he thick mud, and began to work my way around the house.

Reaching the back yard, I recognized what I was hearing. It was the slamming of horses' hoofs against the stable wall. The poor horses were imprisoned and had been left to die in the hurricane, too!

As I thought of the horses, I remembered the smithy. All those tools!

I waited against the corner of the house until a particularly fierce gust of wind had passed. Then I dashed to the stable. Within its shelter, I paused and leaned against an upright for support. My heart was pumping wildly. My lungs ached as they gasped for breath. My knees felt weak and my head spun. I was close to fainting. But I could not allow that to happen. Concentrating on thoughts of little Ricky and Bram and poor Jennifer, I fought back the darkness that tried to engulf me.

Around me, the horses stirred fitfully in their stalls. One continued to kick at the wall as if hoping to break through the heavy timbers to freedom.

I asked myself if we could use the horses to help us escape

from Savage Key. It did not seem likely. The island was surrounded by sea and swamp. The horses were too frantic to be manageable. And even if they weren't, even if there was a road to high land, neither Jennifer nor little Ricky would be capable of riding.

When I had finally caught my breath and steadied myself, I opened the stall gates and drove the panicky animals out, hoping that they would be able to find their own way to safety.

In the smithy, I looked over the tools. Only a few were familiar to me. I chose the ones that appeared potentially useful. With as many of them as I could carry gathered into my arms, hugged to my breast, I worked my way back to the house.

The tools were heavy, and the storm was increasing in intensity. Crossing the yard to the house was a struggle. By the time I had climbed the stairs to the second floor, I was shaking with exhaustion. At the door to the room in which Bram was imprisoned, I let the tools drop. They clattered to the floor at my feet.

I might have collapsed atop them, but Bram's voice, calling to ask if someone was there, revived me.

Replying that it was I, Laura, I collected myself and looked over the locked door before me. It appeared ominously solid.

I picked up the ponderous maul that I had brought from the smithy. Grasping the haft in both hands, I swung it at the door.

It struck the unyielding oak with a jolt that wrenched at my wrists, almost tearing the maul from my hands.

"What are you doing?" Bram shouted.

"I've got tools! I'm trying to break through the door!" I answered as I stared in dismay at the damage I had done. It was scant. The wood was barely dented.

"You'll never break through it!" he told me. "Try the lock!"

"I don't have a key!"

"What do you have? Is there something to pry with?"

Among the tools was a thick metal bar that tapered to a wedge at the end. It looked as if it might have been made for just that purpose.

"Yes!" I called back, dropping the maul and snatching up the bar.

"Wedge it in between the door and the frame, as close to the lock as you can!"

I did as he instructed. When the narrow edge of the bar was firmly seated, I threw my whole weight against the other end and suddenly went sprawling as the old lock tore apart!

The door slammed open!

Scrambling up, I ran into the room.

Bram was sitting on the foot of the bed, his chained leg drawn up, his chin resting on his knee. He lifted his head as I rushed toward him.

I threw myself upon him. Flinging my arms about his neck, I sobbed with relief.

He ran his fingers into my rain-drenched hair. Gently drawing back my head, he looked into my face. "What's happened? You're soaking wet, covered with mud!"

I stammered, "It—it's raining!"

"I know," he said with a bit of a smile at my understatement. The storm was raging fiercely outside, the wind slamming gouts of rain against the windows. The house complained of the buffeting with creaks and groans and shudders.

Bram's smile faded. His dark eyes looked solemnly into mine. "This is no common summer squall. It's a hurricane. I could feel it coming. Smell it. The glass must be near botton by now. We've got to get out of this house. Off Savage Key. We've got to warn the others—"

"They know!" I gasped, reluctantly freeing myself from his embrace. There was no time to be wasted. We had to hurry. Bram had to be freed.

I ran to the door and gathered up the tools that I had brought. Dumping them on the bed beside Bram, I asked, "Can you use any of these to break the chain?"

"Couldn't you get the key away from Pauline?" he said as he chose a file and put it to the chain.

"Pauline's gone," I told him. "She took Hugh and left in the skiff!"

"Abandoned ship, eh? Left us here to go down with it?" He grunted as he rasped the file harshly across a link of chain.

I saw bloody abrasions on his ankle and understood that he had been trying to work free of the chain before I arrived. My heart ached as I thought of the futile desperation he must have felt.

Tautly, he asked me, "My wife? My son?"

"They're locked in Jennifer's room! Pauline left us all here to die!"

"Not everyone always dies in a hurricane. I've known many a seaman who survived them. I've been through a few hard blows myself."

Taking comfort from the strength in his voice, I said, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He glanced at me. "Where's Wesley?"

I shuddered at the horror of the memories that were so vivid in my mind as I told him what had happened. When I finished, he muttered a curse, then said softly, "Maybe he's better off now."

Thinking of the awful torments Wesley had suffered in life, I nodded. At least he had not known the terror of being deserted to die in the hurricane.

Again and again, Bram worked the file across the chain. Each cut seemed infinitely small. The slowness with which the file bit into the metal of the chain was almost unendurable. Bram's knuckles were white with tension. Sweat beaded his forehead. My hands knotted in sympathy as I watched. Urgent impatience swelled within me, until I could barely restrain myself from screaming.

At last the file broke through the link, and Bram jerked the chain apart. He swung his feet to the floor and stood up stiffly. I could tell that his ankle was sore. He limped as we hurried across the hall.

He did not need the pry-bar to open the door to Jennifer's room. Lunging against it, he shattered the flimsy lock.

Ricky had been cuddling at his mother's side. As the door crashed open, he jumped up. His face was blotched and wet with tears. At the sight of his father, he beamed through them. Tumbling from the bed, he rushed to Bram's arms. Bram scooped him up in a loving hug.

With all my soul, I yearned to be the woman who would make a home for the two of them. Enviously, I looked at Jennifer. The envy in me faded away as I sensed that she would never make a home for them now.

Her face was ashen pale and her smile wan. She did not attempt to lift her head from the pillow. Her voice was barely audible as she said to Bram, "Goodbye, my love."

Setting down Ricky, he answered her, "No more goodbyes, Jen. Never again. I'll never leave you again as long as we both live."

"I must leave *you*. Father is waiting for me. *The Star* is

coming for us. I've lingered so long already. I had to see you once more. To say goodbye," she told him. Then, glancing at me, she added faintly, "Take care of them . . ."

Her eyes closed.

Bram gathered her into his arms. Her head slumped against his shoulder. Her face nestled into his neck. I thought she kissed him. Then she went limp, her head lolling.

"*No*!" he protested.

Around us, the wind wailed and groaned, and the timbers of Savage House sighed.

Appalled, I said, "Is—is she—?"

His stricken eyes answered me.

Gently, he returned her to the bed Bending over her, he brushed the hair back from her face, then kissed her tenderly. Lovingly.

I felt no pang of jealousy. Only compassion. I understood Bram's love for Jennifer, just as I knew my own love for Wesley.

Tugging at my skirts, Ricky asked, "Is Mama sleepy?"

"Yes," I replied.

Bram turned from his wife's lifeless body to hold out his arms to his son. Eagerly, Ricky slipped into them. Too young to understand death, and weary from the fears he had felt earlier, the boy murmured, "I sleepy, too."

From overhead came an ominous screeching of beams and rafters strained by the battering of the storm.

"We've got to get out of here." Bram reached for my hand. "We've got to get to high ground."

I reminded him, "Pauline took the skiff."

"It doesn't matter. A boat wouldn't be of any use to us on that sea now. We've got to find some other way."

I clung to him as we hurried down the hall. The floor shuddered under us. The whole house shook with the violence of the storm. Glass crashed as windows shattered.

Within my mind, I heard an echo of Wesley's voice telling me of another hurricane and of the Indians who had survived it. I exclaimed, "The Indian mounds! Across the bay!"

"What?" Bram asked.

As we raced down the stairs, I told him in brief, breathless snatches about the villagers who had found refuge from a terrible storm in the ancient Holy Place of their ancestors.

With a wrenching scream of shearing timbers, the roof above us started to collapse. Lath and plaster from the ceiling showered down on us as we reached the bottom of the stairs.

The doors at both ends of the main hallway had been torn from their hinges. The wind whipped through, almost flinging me from my feet. Bram's strong hand held me. He led me toward the back doorway.

Suddenly a massive piece of the ceiling came slamming down in front of us. Beams and floorboards from above came with it, blocking our way.

Wheeling, Bram turned me toward the far end of the hall. As we ran, the walls crumbled around us. The thunder of falling beams sounded above us and behind us.

The sheltering roof of the veranda was already gone. As we lunged through the doorway, the rain hit us like a solid mass of water ripping through suddenly opened floodgates. The wind was tearing boards from the veranda floor, spinning them wildly into the air. One whipped past, barely inches from us.

Bram was carrying Ricky against his chest with one arm. His other hand was grasping mine. Ricky squirmed and whimpered, his little arms hugging his father's neck. Murmuring words of comfort, Bram tightened his grip on his son. He released my hand and caught me about the waist. His arm held me securely against his side as we dashed down the steps into the yard.

A booming crash sounded behind us. I glanced back. Savage House was disintegrating. The winds were catching the shattered pieces, scattering them around with unimaginable fury. All around us, torn timbers that a man might hardly have lifted without help were being tossed in the air like broom straws.

The lashing rains forced my eyes to mere slits. The wind tried to wrench me from Bram's side and throw me to the ground or into the air along with the timbers. The rain pounded at me as if to crush me.

As we found our way across the yard, the ferocity of the storm lessened. Its roar eased to a wail. And I heard something that sounded terribly like a human voice screaming in wretched despair.

The screams were too human. I could not ignore them. It seemed to me someone else was alive nearby. Someone who must need help.

As I turned to speak to Bram, the storm blasted as us again, renewing the intensity of its rage. I had to shout to make myself heard.

He nodded in reply, indicating that he had heard the

screams, too. I gestured to suggest that we should go back in the direction from which the sounds had come. He shook his head. I tried to shout a protest to him that someone needed help. The freshened fury of the storm made speaking and hearing impossible.

Bram dragged me on, toward a massive old oak that twisted and writhed as if in agony. Limbs were being ripped from the tree and thrown into the air. Beyond it, I could see palmettos bowed almost to the earth as fronds torn from their heads soared away like frantic birds.

Reaching the huge trunk of the oak, Bram pressed me up against the lee side of it. I realized it offered some small shelter from the pounding of the storm. Leaning against it, I was able to catch my breath and hear Bram shouting questions. He asked if I thought I could hang on there and keep Ricky safe with me, while he investigated the screams.

I was fearful of his leaving us, but I nodded and accepted Ricky into my arms.

Sitting against the shuddering trunk of the oak, I hugged Ricky to me. He was frightened and fretting. I tried to comfort him—and myself—by resting my cheek against his.

The screams seemed to have come from the southwest. Although the winds swirled and gusted and slammed around erratically, for the most part they were coming off the Gulf. Bram had to head into them. Crouching low, he fought their hammering.

I leaned a bit past the bole of the tree to watch him. Despite the hand that I shielded them with, my eyes were forced closed by a blast of stinging rain. When I managed to open them again, he was lost from my sight in the solid screen of rain.

Every bit of debris that whirled past send a shock of fear through me. One like it might strike Bram down. He might never return.

But he had to come back! For my sake, and Ricky's, he *had* to come back!

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Moments seemed like hours as I waited with Ricky in my arms and prayed for Bram's safe return, while the storm raged around us. Again and again, I tried to look in the direction that he had gone. Each time, the rain would blind me. I would wipe at my eyes, then look once more.

At last I glimpsed him. A faint blur barely seen through the screen of wind-lashed rain. Shielding my face with my hand, I squinted through my fingers.

As he drew nearer, the blur took the shape of a man. I made out that he carried something large in his arms. A body.

Pauline!

Reaching the scant shelter provided by the trunk of the old oak, he sunk to his knees and put her on the ground. I saw that she was not dead, but unconscious.

I stared at her.

Drenched, her hair a wet, straggling mass of tangles, her gown tattered, her face sunken and pallid, she looked as if she were a bit of flotsam that had been broken and abandoned by life Nothing was now visible of the lovely woman she had once been.

Bram leaned close to me to make himself heard. "I found her on the beach below here. With Hugh. He was dead. The skiff must have capsized. She was hysterical I had to—" He fisted a hand and made a striking gesture with it, then gave a slow shake of his head. Having to hit a woman, even Pauline, had disturbed him. Apologetically, he added, "I couldn't reason with her. She was raving. Like a madwoman. She kept trying to fight me. It was the only way I could help her."

The emotions within me were as turbulent as the storm that was raging around me. I hated Pauline with unbridled fury. She had tried to kill us all, in a terribly vicious way. The thought that Bram had risked his life in the hurricane in order to resue *her* burned in my throat.

Yet it was impossible for me not to feel some pity for the poor wretched creature that lay unconscious in the mud before me. She had lost the son who had been all the world to her. She might have lost her wits as well, to judge from what Bram said. It would have been murder to abandon her to the storm.

I had once tried to commit a cold-blooded murder. I had meant to revenge myself by the killing of Hugh Marlin. But despite all the justification I felt, I had not been able to carry out my intentions.

Bram's face told me that he had no will to kill in cold blood either. In the heat of drunken fury, in the desperate desire to protect me, he had attacked Hugh and might have strangled him if he had not been stopped. But now, in sober reason, he would not kill. Although this woman had taken pleasure in leaving him to die a prisoner in the collapse of Savage House, his eyes said that he would not turn his back on her.

I asked him, "The others?"

He shook his head. I could envision Pauline with her terrible strength of will somehow managing to sustain her son when the skiff went down, somehow managing to drag his body ashore with her. Henrietta would have had no such will to live or to save Charlotte. I suspected that she would have welcomed the oblivion offered by the sea.

And Diego? He had gambled his life when he left the refuge of the Indians to return to Savage Key with the skiff for us. Had he lost his gamble? Or had he been able to reach shore, as Pauline had? Would he find the arms of his wife and children again?

Bowing my head, I prayed for them all.

Bram allowed me a long moment, then drew my attention back to our own situation with a gentle touch of his hand.

The storm continued to increase in intensity. Even though he shouted at me, I could barely hear his words over its roar. "This is just the leading edge! It's going to get a lot worse! There's likely to be a flood tide that will drown this whole key! We've got to get to the high ground!"

He gave a glance toward Pauline. "I'll have to carry her! Can you manage Ricky?"

Hugging the boy to me, gathering my strength and courage, I nodded.

With Pauline's limp body in his arms, Bram led the way. I held Ricky tightly to my breast as I followed close at his back. We were heading toward the bay. For the most part, the storm was coming from behind us, shoving us on. But erratic gusts of wind thrust at us as if to catch us and fling us into the sky, and the hammering rain seemed determined to crush us into the earth.

I could barely catch breath. I couldn't keep my eyes open

but had to snatch quick glances ahead through my lashes. At times, when the wind turned against us, we could not even move ahead but had to huddle together and wait for it to turn again.

At last we reached the narrow stretch of bay that separated Savage Key from the mainland. Despite the downpour and the runoff flooding from the mangrove swamps, the tide was very low. It was as if the sea swallowed the rain as fast as it fell. An unnatural expanse of exposed bottom stretched from the high-tide line to the edge of the water.

"We won't have to swim any!" Bram shouted to me. "It's shallow enough to wade! But the current's strong! Hang onto me if you can!"

I shifted Ricky up onto my shoulder and told him to hug me with all his strength. His arms wrapped snugly around my neck. Holding him with one hand, I grabbed the back of Bram's belt with the other.

He started slowly across the exposed bay bottom, cautiously choosing footing among the jagged masses of oyster shell that crusted in heavy clumps around us. The mud was slimy silt. As we stepped into it, we sunk to our ankles. It took effort for me to draw a foot from the clinging ooze, and force of will for me to advance it another step.

The water was covered with wreckage from the house and the trees. Whole palmettos, torn up by the roots, tossed and tumbled in the fierce current. As we waded in, pieces of debris slammed toward us. Bram fended them as best he could while carrying Pauline.

My fingers ached as they clutched his belt. My whole body grew numb from the icy chill of the water and the wind and the pounding rain. Weariness was like a thick, sticky fog seeping through my every fiber. It clouded my mind. I began to lose all sense of reality.

I felt as if nothing existed in the entire world except the storm that pressed in on me. It was trying to drown me, to suffocate me, to beat me to death with its battering rains and raging winds and flung debris.

On and on and on we waded, the water whipping around Bram's waist and splashing at my breasts Ricky's cheek was against mine. Although he was close by my ear, I could not hear his terrified sobs above the sounds of the storm. But I could feel the heaving of his small body as they wrenched through him. Then I was aware of his calming, as exhaustion finally drove him into sleep.

I longed to sleep myself. The thought of stopping, of resting, began to obsess me. Only my grip on Bram's belt kept me on my feet. Only the boy in my arms kept me willing to continue the awful struggle.

We reached the deepest part of the bay. Passed it. Began working our way up toward the mainland. But our battle did not ease when we entered shallower water. The storm continued to increase its rage. It grew wild beyond all my imaginings.

I glimpsed stands of palmettos bending under the blasts of the wind like meadow grasses. Ancient oaks and thick-trunked pines were ripped entirely from the earth and tossed into the skies. The tangled masses of mangroves lining the bay were twisted and torn. The leaves stripped from them filled the air. Torn into shreds like tea leaves prepared for the pot, they plastered my face so tightly that even the force of the rain could not wash them all away.

It seemed that I had been wading through thigh-deep water as long as I could remember, when I became aware that something had changed. I was no longer crossing the current. Now I was fighting directly into it. I discovered that walls of mangroves were writhing on either side of me.

Dimly, I realized that we had at last reached the mainland. Now we were working our way up the only path that could take us to the high land. We were in one of the streams that flowed past the Indian mounds down into the bay. There was no dry ground around us, no open foot trail to the mounds, but only the impassable tangle of the mangrove swamp.

I moved like a machine, a clockwork figure that moved mindlessly through time, one step, the another, struggling up the endless stream, fighting into the eternal current. When Bram stopped, I kept going, walking into him. I stumbled and started to fall.

Instantly slinging Pauline's limp body over his shoulder, Bram wheeled to catch me with the arm he had freed. As he hugged me to him, the life force within me stirred. My mind began to clear. Lifting my head, I looked up at him through my lashes.

He offered me the encouragement of a smile as he told me, "We're here! The big mound!"

It was only then that I became aware of the hill looming before us. It was very high, with steeply sloping sides. The rainwater poured down it in torrents, cutting deep gashes and gullies in the sandy slopes.

"I can't climb while I'm carrying Pauline, and help you with Ricky at the same time!" Bram shouted over the noise of the storm. "And there isn't any place I can put her down!"

I glanced around. We were still in the midst of the flooded swamp. Only the Indian mounds and the crowns of the mangroves rose above the turbulent water.

There were weed grasses and clumps of brush growing on the sides of the mound, clinging in place despite the cascades of runoff that tumbled down the slopes. I thought they might offer handholds for a climber. Mustering my courage, I said, "I'll manage!"

"Carrying Ricky? I don't want you to chance it," he answered. "It would be better if you can wait while I take Pauline up. Then I'll come back for the two of you!"

I knew that he was right. I might risk the climb alone, but I should not even attempt it while I held Ricky in my arms.

I nodded.

Bram grabbed a mangrove branch. He tugged hard at it, testing its strength. Assured that it was sound, he led my free hand to it. "Hang on here! Don't let go!"

When he was certain that I had secure footing and a good grip on the branch, he left me. Squinting against the rain, I was able to see him start up the mound. With the encumbrance of Pauline's body on his shoulder, he climbed slowly. I saw him slip once, but he managed to catch himself and go on.

The thick curtain of rain blocked my view of him before he had reached the top.

I shivered in the icy water as I stood hugging Ricky and clinging to the mangrove. Suddenly I realized that the water was rising. Moments before, it had been thigh-deep. Now it was almost to my waist. In minutes, it might reach my breasts. And then?

As the water rose, the current seemed to be growing stronger. It pulled at me as if determined to break my grip on the mangrove and send me tumbling amid the debris that it rushed toward the bay. If it succeeded, I knew both Ricky and I would be lost forever.

My lips moved in silent prayer for Bram's quick return.

At last I saw him coming, slipping down the side of the mound, then shoving through water that was well above his waist now.

"Pauline's safe," he said as he took Ricky from me. "You'll have to hang onto me! I'll need one hand to hold Ricky and one to climb with!"

Despite his efforts to hide his weariness from me, I could see that he was nearing exhaustion. His struggle through the storm, carrying Pauline and assisting me while he fended the water-tossed debris that had threatened us, had been far more difficult than my fight to stay with him. I thought that Ricky would be burden enough for him. I did not want to add myself to the difficulties he would face in climbing the mound again.

Collecting the little strength that I had left, I told him, "I can climb without help!"

He argued with me, but I insisted that I could manage to get up the slope on my own. At last, he reluctantly gave in.

"All right!" he said. "You go on ahead. I'll be right behind you!"

I understood that he wanted to be in a position to aid me if I should slip. I smiled. He answered my smile with a quick kiss on my forehead.

As I released my hold on the mangrove branch, the current almost jerked me from my feet. Unwilling as I was to encumber Bram while he was carrying Ricky, I had to accept his help through the water to the base of the mound. There, with the brush and weeds to grasp, I freed him to give his attention to his son.

The torrents of water rushing down the slope splashed into my face as I began to climb. Eyes clenched shut, I groped for handholds. My feet skidded in the mud. My fingers slid on the slick weeds. Grabbing a quick glance back, I saw that Bram was having trouble, too. In his desire to protect Ricky, he made even slower progress up the mound than I did.

I finally reached the top. Dragging myself onto the level, I caught breath and wiped at my face with the back of a muddy hand. As a gust of wind eased, I forced open my eyes.

Young pines and thick clumps of low scrub palmetto dotted the level plateau atop the mound. The storm had uprooted many of the pines and snapped others through their trunks, but the low bushy palmettos only bent and writhed under the blasts. They surrendered fronds but not their hold on the earth.

On my hands and knees, I worked my way to the shelter of the nearest clump. The palmettos offered windbreak enough to allow me to stand. As I rose I was startled by a shrill screech stabbing through the roar of the storm. Turning toward the sound, I saw Pauline.

She was coming at me in a crouch. Even through the thick screen of rain between us, I could see the intense hatred burning in her face.

Appalled, I stared at her.

"*You*!" she wailed, and the wind brought her words to me. "You ruined everything! If only you had died when Hugh threw you into the sea!"

Her hands reached toward me, the fingers curving like claws.

Behind me, Bram shouted in desperate warning. I heard his cry. The sound of his voice broke the trance that held me.

Pauline was lunging at me. I realized that she meant to kill me.

Jerking back, I slipped in the mud.

As she threw herself at me, I fell.

Her outthrust hands missed me. The momentum of her rush sent her stumbling on past me.

For an instant, I glimpsed her poised at the edge of the slope. Her arms flailed desperately as she fought for balance. And then she was gone.

Bram reached me as I was scrambling to my feet. He hugged me to his side. Together, we looked down into the black roiling water below.

We could see no trace of Pauline.

Sobbing with hysterical exhaustion, I collapsed against Bram's chest.

We huddled together in the slim protection of the palmetto scrub, Bram and I sheltering Ricky between us. In the darkness of the night, the full force of the hurricane struck and the flood tide raged through the swamp. Although we could not see it, we could hear it as it rushed toward us. The sound, indescribable, was more terrible than any I had ever heard. I felt that only Bram's embrace held my soul within my body as the great wave swept toward us.

It struck the mound, the crest of it breaking, washing over us, as the bulk of it slammed into the walls of the mound and shook the ground as if the earth quaked. For long, long moments, I thought that our refuge would collapse, the mound crumbling into mud under us, swirling away on the wild tide.

And then the worst was over, and we were still safe.

I slept, lying in the warmth of Bram's arms, with Ricky cuddled against me.

When I woke, the sun was well up in a brilliant blue sky as clear as crystal. Not a wisp of a cloud marred its perfection. The light breeze that played around me was filled with the scents of the Gulf and of green living things.

Somewhere nearby a mockingbird cheerfully sang its claim to the land.

Ricky was still asleep, nestled against me with one little arm hugging my waist.

Bram was gone.

Gently, I disengaged myself from Ricky's embrace without awaking him. Sitting up, I looked around anxiously.

To my relief, I spotted Bram standing at the edge of the mound, gazing toward the Gulf. I rose and went to his side.

From the height of the mound, we looked out upon desolation and ruin. The mangroves had been flattened by the flood. Uprooted trees lay tossed in tangles. Debris was everywhere.

Beyond the mangroves, beyond the bay that shimmered serenely in the morning sun, I could see Savage Key.

A few bedragged palmettos still stood where there had been jungle. The ancient oaks that had surrounded the house still had their roots firm in the earth, although their crowns were stripped bare of leaves and many of their gnarled branches were broken.

The house and the outbuildings were gone, as if they had never existed.

I realized that Bram was not looking at the key, but at something beyond it. Shading my eyes against the glitter of the sunlight on the Gulf, I saw it there in the shallows.

The wreckage of a vessel shattered by the storm.

A steamer.

I put my hand on Bram's arm. "That ship—?"

"It's *The Savage Star,*" he said softly. "She must have tried to run ahead of the storm. It caught up with her."

Jennifer's faint voice echoed in my mind, telling me that she and her father would sail on *The Star*. I shuddered at the memory.

Then I remembered the message she had given me for Bram. I told him, "You'll have other ships. Finer ships."

He turned and took me into his arms.

"That doesn't matter," he said. "Not as long as I have you."

"I WANT TO GO HOME! I'LL NEVER MARRY HIM!"

"You listen, my fine little frigate," Captain Savage said sternly. "You've really small choice in the matter. When this vessel leaves me at Savage Key, she's going on to New Orleans with Bram Ainsley as master. If you don't come with me, THEN YOU'LL STAY ABOARD WITH HIM!"

Laura Wickham shuddered. To be offered as a bride to a man she had never met was awful enough, but to become the captive of a man whose rampant desires were beyond control was too much.

She would follow the captain to the desolate islet known as Savage Key – unaware that the future that awaited her would be as passionate and fiercely dangerous as the fate she'd fought so desperately to avoid . . . .

ISBN 0-340-32053-2

90195

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UK £1.95